

THE PRINCE AND THE ROSE

(a novel based on the life of Bir Tekendrajit)

Th. Suresh Singh

**Published by
Lakshmipriya Devi,
Khagempalli Panthak,
Imphal, Manipur State
(INDIA)
1986**

**This edition first published in India in 1986 by Smt. Lakshmipriya
Devi, Khagempalli Panthak, Imphal, Manipur, India.**

**Printed in India
Swapna Printing Works Pvt. Ltd., *
52, Raja Rammohan Sarani, Calcutta 700 009**

THE PRINCE AND THE ROSE

PREFACE

This novel portrays the anguished response of the freedom-loving people of Manipur to the gradual process of British subjugation in the sub-continent in the nineteenth century. Tekendrajit is a legend. It was he who took up arms against the British empire and paid the supreme penalty of law for his motherland. The book is based on history but it also draws its embellishment from the ballads that cluster around him, from interviews with those whose grandfathers fought in the war of liberation. Could we deny a novel its own reality because it has an oblique reference to historicity. What about the feelings sensibilities and ethos of a people that were handed down from mouth to mouth, heart to heart !

Besides, I am greatly indebted to Shri R.K Madhuryajeet Singh, the grandson of the Yuba rajah for his painstaking and invaluable work of going through the script before the printing of the book without whose help the book could not have been published.

I am also indebted to Shri I. Tompok Sinch, Minister of Education, Manipur and Shri E. Nilakanta Singh, Director, Deptt. of Art & Culture, Manipur for their invaluable encouragements. So also to my brother artist Th. Tombi Singh for making the cover design of the book.

I again acknowledge with gratitude the valuable suggestions given by Shri Th. Chhandabihari Singh, IPS., Retired D.I.G., Shri N. Mangi Singh, M.Ed., and Shri L. Ashok Singh, Archivist, Manipur State Kala Akadami, Imphal.

Imphal, July 17, 1986

Th. Suresh Singh

CHAPTER I

The Top Garod is now a prison-cell, Prince Tekendrajit Bir Singh said as he paced up and down in the stuffy room; chains jangled on his legs; outside the prison, one black and dwarfish Gurkha sepoy tapped on the cobbled path with heels of his boots, and he went near the door and peeped through the key-hole; he grinned and jeered at the prince. They stood face to face with their eye-balls encountering each other. The sepoy grunted with a cough and spat on the floor.

The gritty morning breeze wafted through the clusters of marigold flowers on the boulevard of the palace. Birds twittered on the leafy trees.

"Sanaton, Sanaton, Tekendrajit Bir Singh, the Yubarajah," shouted old Thangal in his cell; he coughed with a rumbling sound; the old general's call sheared the inmates of the prison in the next cell; Maharajah Kullachandra busied himself with anhis in another cell. Prisoners in the next cell said, "The good old time is over now!" The commotion drew the sentries outside the prison and sounds of thumping of boots filled the morning air.

"What's to-day's luncheon? I'll die very soon and an old man like me could bear taunts of these entrails of the dogs, but Prince Tekendrajit is young. Only he has completed half of his life! The Engrez cherish justice, how long, sure it's coming. My life's candle is almost burnt out. Life is sour, sourness is sweet! Your Ipu won't live long; I heard the sound of hammer on my coffin! And I'm pushing over eighty and I've seen kings come and go and also making and unmaking of kings and generals. I rose from an obscurity to the Prime Minister of Sir Chandrakirti, ha, ha, ha," with guffaws, he sank himself on the bed. The prince said "Ipu, the Engrez won't wait long, they have the grudge of an elephant." "But, Sanaton, remember the pledge at Lambal village!," the old general said, and his head sank and rested on the stone wall and his hand rubbed his eagle nose.

The old general rose from his bed of planks and stumbled towards the door with iron-bars; he heard the bugles and the march of the British general; he grinned, fumed, and fussed like the blowing billows. The bugles blared again in the crisp morning air and resounded on the polo-ground. General Collett rode on a

white horse with Union Jack and mounted sepoy rode behind him past the prison and they saluted the old general Thangal in the prison; the old general nodded, grinned and clenched his fist. "Yubarajah, Yubarajah," he shouted from the prison and nodded his head silently thinking that it was only his mind that was calling the young prince. The young prince was thrown in the Quarter-Guard with sentries round the clock.

The dull glint of the spurs, swords and the martini rifles of the mounted sepoy moved like phantoms. "Kings, princes and generals are like beads in my rosary," the old man thought. "Beads in rosary have no time sense, man lives in ideas, actions in ideas; man lives in imaginations that he hardly attains; happiness knows no time barriers, beads are like chunks of time and gaps between the beads are time-gaps and beads has no time sense. I saw a new king, a babe in the golden cradle. The generals are pawns in the chess-boards of time," the old general said and he gripped the iron-bars with sweat. "Prince Tekendrajit was a forsaken babe in a golden cradle and his mother, did not rock singing nursery rhymes. Kosheswori, his divorced mother is a flower withered not by the march of time but by hatred, intrigues. The prince is young and kingship immortal; kings are passing stars," General Thangal bawled out and he turned his shrunken eyes under his over-hanging white eye-brows towards his crumpled bed and lay on it and gazed on the wall. The old man chuckled and grinned and chuckled. "A new age, a glorified life!" he said with a wry smile.

"Kajao, Pukhramba Phingang is hanged," shouted Chaobhal as he stood on the door-way in the cell; the Gurkha sepoy stood locking the rusty gigantic brass-lock. "Kajao is hanged," he repeated with tears in his eyes as he bowed his head touching the floor before Tekendrajit in his cell. "Could it happen, Yubarajah, he said to himself. Yes, he said with a big stare in his eyes. "Who told you?" said the Yubarajah. "Everybody at Sanakeithel knows," he replied, "How did they execute the deed so smoothly and so secretly; oh, the British work-manship, the British statemanship and the devilry! Kajao is dead but he laughs at his death. Life is fun, his life is also fun and so Grimwood's life is another fun. A cruel attack on the children and women while they were asleep. Queen Victoria's choicest messengers, did the job of killing children and women while they were asleep and also

without mercy! Could it restrain Kajao's spear on that fateful day on the steps of the darbar? No!"

"I see the shrouds," Chaobhal cried out as he fell on the prince's feet, "but there is time." The prince looked at Chaobhal with his eyes almost drawn out and saw his head resting on his cupped hands hiding his tears in his eyes. "Chaoba, why so much womanliness," the prince said. A jangling sound was heard and the gigantic brass lock opened with a shrill sound. Shija Angangmachha entered into the cell with her head veiled and with her hand she led her son. The sentry peeped through the key-hole, *and* spat and moved away with the iron-nailed boots grating over the pavement. She bowed her head and the veil shielded her tears and she sorted the prison luncheon. "How is son?" the prince said with a soft voice. "Fine, Sanakhwa," she said with a low tone, and she wiped her tears with her chaddar. The child played on the prince's lap.

"A cruel joke," Tekendrajit grunted as the door opened again and the sentry came with a white sergeant carrying a spoon and stuck it into the rice and curry saying, "See if there is any smuggling of message and small arms!" The two left the cell with the march of the victorious army and locked the gigantic brass-lock with the grating sound.

"Chaobhal, the August wind is dry and get me some gourds or water-melons," the prince said with a soft voice. "It is the dhup aarati hour, no more sounding of the temple bell of Lord Govinda, Chaobhal, Lord Govinda is staying at the temple of Thakur Das of Khongman, the royal priest, but how long, this God belongs to the people of young Manipur and you keep it at the Lord's former abode again. It's only you who could do!" said the prince with a sonorous voice.

The next day came with jaundice-colour evening; Chaobhal brought basketful of gourds and cucumbers to the cell for his master and the English sergeant paced towards him with his rifle slung on his arm and shouted "You heck, what things you smuggle into the prison!" The sergeant caught hold of the basket and flattened all the gourds and cucumbers on the cobbled path with his boot. Chaobhal stood frozen on the ground. "Nothing inside!" the sergeant cried; and tears almost dried in Chaobhal's eyes and he clenched his fists as he stood listening to the huge brass lock opening with a grating sound.

"Let me rescue you, Sanakhwa from this hellish prison and three hundred mounted kuts will rescue you from this prison, and the garrison is equipped with guns and spears and arambais," Chaobhal said as he fell on the prince's feet. "Please don't say no, Yubarajah," he said again, "Master Yengkhoiba will lead the raid for rescue." "But how!" Tekendrajit quipped as he peered at his attendant's eyes.

"One hundred mounted kuts will advance from the north and another hundred from Keishampat along the Nambul river and the last from Iroishemba and they'll meet at the Sanakeithel. Master Yengkhoiba will lead the attack," pleaded Chaobhal as he fell on his feet. "Are we all cowards, no, the whole country will raise, all young and old. The womanfolk will also rise with broomsticks and pestles." Tekendrajit's eyes looked blank and he looked outside the prison and saw the autumn birds twittered among the trees in the boulevard of the palace.

The prince sat mute and dumb. The leaves of trees rustled in the August breeze.

The huge brass lock opened again with the jangling sound and one turbaned man came inside the cell with two British officers. "Call your next of kin to see you now," the Engrez officer said in Hindustani. A dead chill reigned in the cell and they left the room without a word and the door locked again. Basak came running towards the cell with his heart almost thrown out of his bosom crying, "The judgement is out, the judgement is out! He beat his breast as he ran and the sentry opened the lock.

"What judgement!" Chaobhal cried out as he leaped to his feet with his eyes coming out of the sockets. Basak fell on the Yubarajah's feet without a word and buried his face in his sleeves.

"Better live just only for two days as a free man rather than live a slave forever!" shouted Thangal in his prison. He gripped the iron-bars and said "Appeal for mercy is dismissed." Lamphel and his mother, Sachipriya, and Leiren and Mikoï walked heavily towards the old man's prison.

"But, Sanakhwa, we die for you, we're ready to rescue you, a garrison of three hundred is waiting for your words, a garrison, still at your beck and call, give your words. Master Yengkhoiba is waiting to free you from this prison and from the noose!" cried

out Chaobhal burying his face in his sleeves.

Shija Angangmacha visited the cell with the Ganges water and a priest; she sorted the tillaks and the silken robes that the prince wore on his journey to Koirengei to receive the Chief Commissioner. She brought the white chaddar for his shrouds. His young son played on his lap.

"A rescue is a must," said Chaobhal wiping out his tears, "An English justice is no less justice denied and one minute's interval is one century's hellish eclipse of joy and mirth."

The scaffold is ready, shouted Chaobhal; a huge wooden structure was seen in the sky-line of the western direction and everything was ready with manila rope and five hundred armed sepoy around the scaffold. With white chandana tillaks on his white forehead, Tekendrajit walked towards the day waiting for him; Thangal also walked towards the ground of Pheida Pung near the Sanakeithel; they met in front of the go-down of the Commissariat; Col. H.Evans commanded the security arrangements with the precision of a surgeon's knife. Just at the first step from the prison, the sepoy saluted the old general and on the way he did not see the two gigantic dragons and instead two stumps of the dragons stood after dynamiting the huge concrete structures. They stood like scare-crows but the spirit never left the site of the dragons. "Is it not the sacred day?" Tekendrajit thought, "with chandana tillaks on my forehead." He marched on with the beats of boots tapping on the cobbled path. "A sacred day, sure it is," he murmured silently, "An auspicious day! Do I die for felony, adultery or is it a crime to fight for my country and for liberty, oh no, never, old Thangal, grand-dad, a befitting day for him to march to Pheida Pung for such an auspicious day; lest he marches to his final resting place with the coveted kairen-kaijao with the blare of music. "Chief Kammeson amuk hallaklaroi," the bugle sounded and kuts shouted with their cupped hands from the palace walls on that fateful night. But the dragons must be propitiated and so the mouths of the two dragons were red with the blood of the four Engrez sahebs and the bugler. Fourteenth day moon is as bright as the day light," the prince said with his teeth grinding, "Am I not cruel to fire the brass cannon on the residency to create havoc on the riot of roses and on the roof of the house of a lady whose love is now lingering in my bosom. The old man has no heart. Let live

the rose on the bed. But, why can't you count the number of petals of the rose that blooms in your native land, I am sending the best rose from my garden, said Ethel on that fateful day. Where am I going, yes, on this sacred day, a young man and an old man pushing over eighty with chandana tillaks on their foreheads. Yes, on a national errand or on an ambassadorial mission to an unknown place under the shadowless light, and it is for this land of golden Manipur. And I walk on this auspicious day with the lotus-shaped hookah and the tengnou-like silver chellam in my hand!"

"That poor Quinton met his death on the execution-ground on the altar of the Kangla Sha, the gigantic dragons, quite, calm and trained to obey our laws, the hukum of the Maharajah, the God incarnate. I saw the sahibs meet their fates on that fateful moonlit night, a little from behind the dragons," the prince thought as his feet moved with leaden weight on the cobbled path, "This is my last duty to the Maharajah and to the people."

The prince reminisced three hundred yards from the stairs of the palace to the western gate, and forty and three hundred steps from the northern gate of the residency gate to the western gate of the palace : Step one, two, three

"Poor Quinton wanted to wage a war on the ancient lineage of the great Pakhangba and a poor warrior to wage an undeclared war, a war on the sleeping ladies in the Leitong palace! A poor warrior, he marched into the mouth of the lion, seventy and one hundred steps away from the northern gate lies the dividing line between the royalty and the residency, an ideal place for parley! But he entered into the mouth of the lion and he perished on the altar of the Kangla Sha," thought the prince as he marched in front of the Top Garod. Step four, five, six

"And my last duty to the Maharajah and the posterity!" shouted the old general as his vericose-veined legs moved like stilts, "But who are the people, the throbbing people, young and old." The house-wives cried at the ground of Pheida Pung beating their bosoms. The melting snow-wall of time stood between him and the execution. He trudged and walked abreast with the young prince. In the sky-line of the western direction, the manilla rope danced in the gritty August breeze. But the pristine time, the water-clock chimed so still, so majestically "Maharajahs, ministers and generals, I make and unmake them," he mused with a smile

on his lips. Shall I smile on my way to the gallows, he said to himself, and he breathed the gritty evening air to the full and he chuckled and roared but he found his voice failing in him like the distant peals of thunders. And he reminisced about the dark memories of his past days, in the abyss of his glorious days, a glory with new pajeng flags on his turban, new silk robes on his back, a glorified life. His voice echoed and re-echoed in the dark and narrow alley.

"Kings, princes, generals are like beads in my rosary, beads know no time, beads are his exploits, the gaps in his beads are the time-gaps," the old man said as he trudged wearily on the cobbled Raj path. The dogs will eat on the gold plates, old Thangal said with his eyes looking at the white cumulus clouds over the blue hills in the west; young princesses and the lot ransacked the residency and the Agent sahib snapping photographs of the dames and robbing them of their loves, what they were upto, he asked himself. "Sachipriya, Sachipriya, where is the young one, I've not seen her for the last few days," old Thangal said to himself as he left his temple after the prayer. His wife stared on her husband's eyes and made her lips agape but she could not utter any word. "Sachipriya, Sachipriya, where is the young one, not seen making flowers for the God?" he repeated but she looked at her husband but did not say anything; the old man almost rushed towards her bed-room and saw, to his surprise her face hiding by a white chaddar. "What is she doing?" he asked and left the room in silence. The kuts knew her better because the gossips ran, "She is going to wed an Engrez sahib!" The old general paced up and down in his drawing-room and thought, "Who, in this realm could dishonour my daughter!" "Remember, Grinwood Saheb, you are not the only Englishman who has been here as Resident as ruler of the State I have a duty by my own people and I tell you not to go running all over Manipur after the dames. "the words were ringing in his ears and "What the hell, that lankey lieutenant did to a dame in this land and see how I do to the perpetrator of the shame on the family," he reminisced while he put his stilt-legs on the cobbled path; the evening sun wrought a maze of the teeming ladies of Imphal, the phantom-like soldiers in groups arrayed for the escort of the prince and the octogenarian to the gallows. The old general looked at the young prince with his snow-white eyebrows puckering under the evening sun-shine.

"That tall and wheatish coloured dame is Sir Chandrakirti's first love but she left the palace with her face as black as the black dye, kum and streaks of grey hairs on her head," the old General said to himself; the two visions super-imposed on each other, the past and the present, the afternoon breeze touched his creased skin on his face while Prince Tekendrajit's sordid tales of crinkum-crankum raked his mind. Poor Kosheswori, as proud as a maidan in her prime found her maiden vow humiliated by Sir Chandrakirti said with tears in her eyes, "You're the Maharajah of this land but you're a coward, you took me to be your wife before you marry any girl and now your belated recognition threw me headlong into oblivion!" But Sir Chandrakirti had to keep his mother, the Raj Mata's promise "That Angom Shija should be the Queen of the land for we were indebted to them!" "That wax-models of Sir Chandrakirti and the Raj Mata sealed her fate," the old general's oft-quoted words run often. "But young Tekendrajit may sit on the throne had Sir Chandrakirti honoured her maiden vow! The old man went on saying, "That divorce made the young prince what he is to-day, sullen, forlorn, subject to frequent night-mares, claustrophobia, demonism and sadism and felo de se!"

The young prince saw the morning sun blood-soaked red disc; and one evening, at gowal aarati, the moss-covered turret of the royal temple found a strange visitor; the young prince was atop the temple beside the upper railings with floral motifs. The temple bell rang with its musical sound resounding in the valley. "Prince, prince," all cried with their hands raised to persuade the young child to come down from the upper railings of the Lord Govinda's temple; the young prince played hide-and-seed evading all the faces. Sir Chandrakirti emerged from the temple and pleaded the young prince to come down but his paternal words failed. Old Thangal cried, "Maja Ibungo, let us go to my bangalow, your Ipu has lots of sweat-meats and you are the best loved among your brothers, come, come, hurry up, lest Prince Pakkasana, your naughty brother will not share it!" All cried, "Ipu, save the life of young Kotreng!" "Ipu, I agree on the condition that my father should not look at me when I come down," the young prince shouted at the old general.

Thangal and Tekendrajit are one and inseparable, the people said lovingly, The octogenarian rode with the young prince in his twenties to distant battle-fields on the heights of Lairou hills and

rain-soaked ridges of Chassad. The young prince was only a boy riding on his chestnut horse along with General Thangal to the thatch-roofed residency building for reprimand before James Johnstone, the British resident. The old general looked awry and the young prince sullen.

"My faithful Tumnou, you've followed me in the rainsoaked heights of the Khoupum valley, the rhododendron-lined tracts of the Laimaton hills, the coral flowers and flames of the jungle dotted slopes of the Cachar roads, shamjirei orchid-hanging trees of Lairou hills and through the blood-soaked battle-fields," old Thangal said and he gave tender strokes on the horse mane as he dismounted from the horse. He cursed his aching knees and fall almost on the carriage-drive of the residency, and said, "Old age creeps in," and he felt stiffness in his joints that gave a wrench to his right leg. The young prince followed the old man behind and on they paced to the office of the resident and stood in front of the marble-faced saheb; old Thangal shook hands with the tall Agent and the young prince looked sullen and tried to evade the saheb's owlish eyes. "Young prince, why don't you give salute to me when you met me on the way, a prince should know how to pay respect to the Agent Saheb, "the British resident said with his tone like the mid-day caw of a crow. The young prince never forgot this incident and he carried the scene like the graffiti ever since.' And he was never allowed to set foot on the precincts of the residency!

The lamentation of the ladies sounded like the wailings of the sirens in the far-off out-landish sea shores of an island; the Yubarajah and the general inched on their ways, followed the military cadence of the British soldiers with their glinting bayonets.

"Pick up the sword, Haridas and try again," the prince shouted to Haridas with subdued smile. Chaobhal, short and blackish with soft and dreamy eyes advanced with rhino shield in the fencing stance and Haridas encountered him blinking eyes; the prince shouted, "See the eyes like the tiger watching the eyes of his prey, Haridas, try again." "Correct your steps and don't close your eyes when Chaobhal showers his blows; mere keeping eyes shut won't save your neck. Don't invite more lime marks of the vital parts!" the prince shouted.

"Stop!" the prince shouted and both withdrew and bowed to him with heads touching the ground. "Haridas, young man, that

maiden, Thambal shall be your bride, is it not so, Chaobhal, but Chaobhal " the prince said and became reticent again and again said "Haridas will marry the maiden as soon as the Ratha Jatra commences." Haridas hid his face with a red face. "But, Sanakhwa, he relies too much on other's errands and shies off her presence and he becomes mute and dumb!" Chaobhal said as his hands supported his body. The prince looked at young Haridas with scrutinising eyes and left the gymkhana.

The young prince's superb horsemanship inherits from his horse-master, Bedam Singh, Thangal said often to his admirers; he loved to ride his chestnut horse from morn to evening without a stop; the toughest broncho-burster, always ready to break the unruly and untamed horse and he had to gumption for the job. One evening he was breaking an untamed horse on the palace polo-ground and the stifling summer heat drenched him and made his spine chill; Chaobhal followed him on his horse. The prince rode on the horse without a saddle but the animal drenched in sweat galloped in half-breaths and broke off the gallop and stood with its legs pressing against the soft ground with sullen looks. The prince whipped the horse till blood oozed on the hind legs. The animal did not yield to the prince but it stuck its legs on the soft ground. Chaobhal galloped towards the prince and said, "Sanakhwa, I just saw the maiden's father, the lallup who said, he is coming to see you to inform that his daughter had gone with the chap who ran errand for Haridas."

The prince dismounted from the tired horse and sat on the grass wiping his forehead with his kerchief and shouted "Call that badmasha at once and also the abductor, hurry, see how he feels my leather-whip!" A tingling sensation electrified his body like a bride running the gauntlet and he clenched his fists, and watched the thinning of the spectators on the exhibition—ground on the polo-ground. The flaps of the multi-coloured shamiyanas fluttered in the summer wind. The horse-dealers from Comilla had gone to their lodges. The lallup and the abductor came with haste and bowed; darkness enveloped the pavilion. "Lallups, lallups," unknown voices shouted in the darkness.

Sir Chandrakirti cherished the western culture and civilization and inaugurated grand mela on the royal polo-ground and that summer showed the biggest exhibition in the land; pavilions

dotted the big polo-ground and peasants from far-off villages and hills came to the palace to witness the grand mela. With his diamond ringed fingers, Sir Chandrakirti pointed to the pressure lamp that his royal artisans made in the royal foundry; the British resident, Johnstone sniffed the water in the damp evening air and his white gloved memsaheb cried, "Aiees and aahs" at the hand-woven lamthang-khullaks with gold-zharis and the star-spangled poswans and head-gears of Lord Krishna with the plumes of peacocks. "Alack, the day was Tuesday, "the Yubarajah thought in silence tapping his shoes on the cobbled path. A hue and cry; the bridegroom's death marred the grand exhibition. "I am a dirty prince, my English tutor called me," he said to himself. Johnstone banged his table on hearing the news and a dead silence reigned the palace and Sir Chandrakirti shut himself in his chamber. What could the Cheirap do, the lallups questioned themselves. The Agent saheb paced up and down in his drawing-room. "See what I could do! The fourth prince would undo everything and he is the ruin of the state", he bawled out to his wife. He ruffled the old colonial files till late night, and racked his brain. Of course, Mc Culloch's forewarning! The Queen would conquer princely states without bloodshed.!

Johnstone wished a slow, never-ending de trop way of life in this golden valley like the gummed-up Augean-house. "His petulance over the matter is poking his nose in the affairs of the state," old Thangal said, "Prince is a prince, not a single Agent could touch the hair of a prince!" The old general touched his face with his hand but felt the canvas not the skin. The old man and the young man waited the day with aplomb.

"Am I not a prince?" sand the young prince with an aura of self-possession to the old general in his castle.

"Tekendrajit Bir Singh, son of Sir Chandrakirti, the friend of the Viceroy," said Thangal, "I am the wave! It is slow but never ending, I see kings rise and fall."

"I am the impulse and ask no question."

"I am old like the sleeping sea."

"I am the tide."

"Waves wait no time, no man."

"I am a dirty prince, said my English totor."

"I am salt of the soil."

"I am sour."

"I am the thunder!"

"I am the echo!"

"Pray to Lord Govinda, I shall rescue you in no time," said Thangal with his eyes moistened with tears, "Tekendrajit is exiled to the island of Thanga!"

Leiren, his daughter said, "Mikoi, is it possible to happen like this? A prince exiled to an island in his own land!"

"Such is the quirk of fate," said Mikoi as she combed her jet black hairs in front of an oval looking glass, "think Shija Pemton would die of shock in her failing health!"

"Sir Chandrakirti is the ruling Maharajah, and see the prince's mother, Shija Koshe is a flower nipped in the bud," the old general said with his tongue making smacking sounds.

Leiren sat on the thick mat knitting the pillow-cover with her forelock drooping on the lace-work; her father sat sedate with sulky eyes taking a tobacco-pipe puffing and curling the thick smoke leisurely in the still airs of the evening and he slept on a wooden pillow snoring with rasping sounds. Thangjam Chaoba, his attendant busied himself in brushing his saddle and martial dresses.

"Sir Chandrakirti sat sedate with flowing silken robes on the throne in a glissade of love and hatred," the old man said almost in a nightmare and his wife, Sachipriya sat on the mora with a tobacco pipe smoking leaning her back on the stone pillar and said, "Your father sleeps as well as he talks."

"Mother, what's my father doing so?" Mikoi said with her hand smoothing her hairs.

"A general could do better if he could take a nap while riding a horse," Sachipriya said, "because he has to gallop from the palace to the Mao station within a few days." His daughters looked at the old man and listened to his snore with grating sounds.

"The Maharajah said nothing in the darbar, only his eyes spoke of the past and the present, successions of kings and his lineage, the sanction of the Viceroy for making his eldest son, Surchandra secure on the throne of Manipur, next Kullachandra, and next Tekendrajit Bir Singh, think the Burmans who smoked

the Manipuris with chillies in closed rooms, the hard-earned freedom, the vignettes in the regalias of the great Pakhangbas, princes and princesses, all issuing from the groins of the ancient Maharajahs, , gold epaulettes, silk turbans with gold zharis and the charot-root shampoo-scented Maharani's chambers; and of course, love has its roots in its crows' feet, the leibak-lei flowers know no barriers!" she added.

"Ipu, General," Sir Chandrakirti shouted in a nightmare, "my fourth prince is exiled to the island of Thanga!" The Maharajah left the coronation chamber in a nightmarish delusion.

"Exile of a prince is a word coined by the Engrez," shouted the old general and he piped the tobacco with hasty puffs.

Mikoi gazed on his father, wondered at his half asleep delirium; the oil lamp flickered in the whining and howling summer winds. The young prince's wife, they told, veiled her head with a white chaddar spoke nothing to any inmates of her house and did not take meals for the last week, it was a shock to the family, not a smile enlivened the young prince's drawing-room. The stuffed heads of nine-foot long tigers, his trophy grinned upside down on the walls.

"I give nothing for nothing, yield nothing to the Manipuris" Thangal said with an echo of Col. Johnstone's ravings in his office in the residency, "the Engrez is a unicorn with its tail tied to its head."

"Should such a thing occur again, I should insist on his permanent banishment from this state!" Col. Johnstone bawled out to the old General and quibbled his feather pen on white paper and sent remonstrance to the darbar." Of course, it is a golden chance to banish the blood thirsty prince outside the town of Imphal but it is not expedient to pursue the matter," said the Colonel, "No prince who defied the Union Jack shall live in this state. But banishment to the God-forshaken island and down-gradation is no lenient!" "That fourth son of Sir Chandrakirti shall prove ruin of the state," he shouted to his clerk thumping the table with a cracking sound.

"Tekendrajit paced with duck's gaits along the tree-lined Raj path; many as time he counted the steps from the stairs of the palace to the two dragons, from the gate of the dragons of the gate of the Top Garod and hence to the western gate and forty

and three hundred steps to the northern gate of the residency; he inched and inched towards the gallows.

The Yubarajah must put on his best dress, with silk turban, Pakhangba-insignia embroidered silk dhoti, pearl-necklaces and gold hilt-sword, Kosheswori, his mother said almost wailing amidst the sound of lamentations of the sea of ladies on the heath of Pheida Pung around the scaffold. It was a ceremonial march to the gallows, to the place of eternity and to nowhere, his mother sobbed beating her bosom. "Was it not a sacred day when my son, Tekendrajit Bir Singh, the Yubarajah walks with the tillak chandana on his forehead and all the make-up of a Yubarajah!" Shija Kosheswori sobbed aloud, "but the luck ran out for my son!"

How many foot-steps from the stairs of the Top Garod to the gallows, the prince thought while the metallic sounds of boots on the cobbled path of the Raj Path tapped with the ticks of seconds passed on. With chandana tillaks on his forehead, the prince left the Top Garod and at the stairs he heard the loud bang of the slamming of the great wooden gate in front of the Garod on the fateful night in the face of Quinton, the Chief Commissioner and Grimwood and his party; with a subdued smile, he sensed the victory in his veins and he exhilarated and inhaled the crisp evening air, and he saw them inching their ways to the closed darbar under the shadowy moonlight. "Why should I give them entry in the royal darbar, no, never, they humiliated the Maharajah of Manipur and his entourage on Sunday in the residency and the Engrez should be paid in their own coins," the prince almost shouted but he grinned, chuckled and fussed and grinned again and guffawed with a grunt. He walked towards the great gate in front of the Top Garod. "Old General Thangal and I saw a sea of kuts and lallups pushing the gate when the Angom Ningthou escorted the Sahebs to this gate, shall they leave the lions' den untouched; they did not see old Thangal and me standing in the cloudy moon-light at the great gate." Tekendrajit said to himself as he walked towards the gate, "O time, it dances in circles!" His feet moved like the skips of the arms of the clock on its round dial.

"And I walk on this auspicious day with the lotus-shaped silver hookah and the tengnou-like chellam on my hand," the prince said.

Step, step and step . . . so on, so on . . his mind shot like the flames of the jungle flowers and heaved to realise that each step had its own tales and echoes.

"Make haste, General, have a parley with Mr. Elliot, the Chief Commissioner of Assam at Kohima," Col. Johnstone said as he put on boots. His wife and Dick and Edward followed him on the cane-litters. With shields, spears and swords, the kuts marched towards the Mayangkhang village under the orchid hanging trees and one early morning, the old General found gout entering into his marrows and on the rain-shaked muddy tracts of Chakumei heights, he crouched on the rain-soaked rocks under the tall deodar trees; the brooks sang the wildest songs on the misty heights winding through the agar-bearing trees. The old general prayed to Lord Govinda, "Pray, that marble faced Colonel never returns to this golden land of Manipur and the young Prince, Tekendrajit may roam peacefully in this land!"

Lamphel, the old general's son rode through the deer-infested jungle of the Barrack valley and said, "Tekendrajit is exiled to the island of Thanga and it is all because the British resident does not like his presence in the palace. But think of the sprouts of rebellions that may shoot up at any time!"

"What, son", old Thangal said waking from his slumber on his tumnou horse back.

"Tekendrajit's exile to Thanga and your absence from the palace for a week or two will make the pretenders raise thier heads?" Lamphel said as he trotted near his father.

"Why, son, General Balaram will defend the palace but he'll discredit me at the slightest pretext," Thangal said as he wiped out the sweat from his snow-white eyebrows. "But a snake under the cot, there is Gangadas, he is watching the suitable time to strike the palace at its weakest moment. The looting of guns from the outposts is the index of the mind that is working behind all this." Of course, hooded riders frequented the outlying villages on the banks of the Imphal river even in the day-time, Thangal said with a sedate voice; their slogans, clear out the Firingis, hate the kite-dresses, beware of the Firingis' grabing of land with the hide of a cow! They were, of course right, he said. But Sir Chandrakirti was wedded to the British friendship without which, what would happen at such a precarious situation, a king with

eight sons. Think a man having eight sons coming from his loins, he said. Tales of murders, patricides and fratricides! Wooh, Sir Chandrakirti is God and he knows what his own sons, those princes would strive in future. Tekendrajit's mother, a queenly lady nipped in the bud, who could have found a respected seat near the throne of Manipur but the history of the throne of Manipur has a chequered tale; a mansion has big pillars; no edifice could stand on the foundations of sand; it must have its roots deep in the soil. Tekendrajit inherits the obduracy from his mother, horsemanship from Master Bedam, swordsmanship from Master Yengkhoiba, violence from apathy, from his brothers of the Karta lineage, a broken home, felo-de-se from his innate love of freedom and his sense of honour and the Sade in him his mother's unconsummate love. At feeding ceremony, the sword and shield he grabbed at, not the books and gold ornaments!

Old Thangal, the diplomat who served Gambhir Singh, Nar Singh and Sir Chandrakirti looked himself in a life-sized looking-mirror and found himself, to his surprise a man in his eighties with deep wrinkles on his face, his jaws almost dropping and an over-shadowing-snow-white-eyebrows; he felt his skin on his face and pulled it like a thin canvas; he looked at his hands and found that skin was almost shrinking from his arms; he found an emptiness in his being and ambled like a newly born calf. Life, a spent force, a ray of sunshine, warmth of the mother-pigeon on her eggs; he suddenly drew his sword from the scabbard and measured its weight at two points of time, one at his twenties and another at his eighties; he felt agape and with a grunt, he put his sword back in the scabbard. Back at his home, he bathed in the holy water of the Ganges after a massage of his legs with mustard-oil. Ivories, brass bells, slaves he brought from distant forays.

"How long could I serve the Maharajah, generations of Maharajahs had I served under them, I am becoming old in the garb of a warrior!" old Thangal fell on the floor in front of his God in his temple. But for Prince Tekendrajit he would have retired to his old home; he was too old, and had to be carried on the backs of slaves on his way to the palace! Almost blind, his perspicuity never dimmed with the age-ing process.

"Ipu Thangal, without you we can't man the fort-palace!" Senapati Tekendrajit fell at his feet on the night of twenty-Second September during the seize of the palace; like a child he

nagged the octogenarian for a whelmsman to brave the stormy sea, to kindle the light of freedom; to pull out the moustache of John Bull; "Sire, Prince Tekendrajit but for you I won't be the Minister, the general! Only for you I wait my ending candle of life," old Thangal said with pearl-drops of tears from his eyes.

Tekendrajit slogged on the red-brick cobbled Raj Path; he turned back and saw Chaobhal's eyes; leafy trees made rustling sounds all around.

"That rebel Gangaram is captured by General Balaram and Col. Shamu. His followers are waiting their execution in the darkness; all executions are hellish," the prince thought. He saw all the captured rebels in chains, in locked boxes with their eyes like caged rats looking at him crying save our lives, save our lives; exposition to death on the execution-grounds at Wangthonbi, Chingmeirong, Shangaibrou, Lilong and Wangkhei Pungjao.

"Of course, the burly Johnstone is holidaying with his Memsahab, his sons at Shillong or elsewhere sniffing air through his long nose all the evils that his fellows are doing," Tekendrajit said as he rode his chestnut horse from his place of exile at Thanga with his bunch of retinues and he stomped into the palace with the sweat and dusts on his red face. He stood before Sir Chandrakirti and said, "Great father, why thou hadst put so much confidence in the English Sarkar? Am I not a prince, why should I live in exile at the God-forshaken island of Thanga? We are nine brothers, nine princesses, each with suitable number of retinues, rifles, swords and shields ready to repulse any attack from the king-makers? Why should I"

He stopped with his words dying from his lips and looked at him, black eyes with gasping breaths and said "And now I live in exile and" The Maharajah looked at him with tears in his eyes and could not see his eyes. His mother's last words rang in his ears, "You love me when you know of love and you forget the maiden vow and and now I live like one in exile!" She turned her face from the Maharajah and went out of the room and since then he could not see her again. Sir Chandrakirti could not say any word to the young Tekendrajit and he turned his face away and walked out of the royal chamber.

To the Yubarajah, only the idea was real not the sounds of the iron-nailed boots tapping on the red brick-cobbled Raj Path;

from the bird-cage gate he walked with firm steps; three hundred steps from the palace to the great western gate; twenty-eight yards from the Top Garod; old Thangal slogged like one waking from the siesta; the Yubarajah used to steal from the deportation and one moon-lit night, he saw a bunch of hooded riders along the banks of the Imphal river on the northern side of the palace; he lashed his horse-whip and galloped towards the strange hooded riders; he was alone and was almost to over-take. "Stop or I heck you with my sword!" he shouted; to his surprise a veiled young lady turned towards him with a smile. He almost dropped his sword and was non-plussed; and the riders galloped off and vanished behind a mango-grove.

"Who could she be? My God, so captivating a young lady! A night nymph or who could she be?" he thought and he galloped off towards old Thangal's residence in the moon-lit night with gasping breaths and the hot summer breeze drying his cold sweats on his forehead.

Yubarajah Tekendrajit took his steps; the lamentations of the multitude of ladies in girds came to his ears like the beating of tides against the shores; the sound of the ocean, the cry of humanity, the wailings of the defeated humanity, a sea of sobs and lamentations, he drew his breaths with his face holding high and looked at his old companion, General Thangal; just near the bird-cage shaped gate, Chingakham Jetoo, Toijamba Mitlao. Hidung Khongbaltaba sat in iron chains and a veiled young lady bound in ropes was among them; she was the veiled rider on that moonlit-night. Tekendrajit went to her and his lips failed to utter any word. It was the twenty-fifth of June; old General Thangal came grumbling with squinted eyes saying "General Sawaijamba will do everything to discredit me in the eyes of the Engrez sarkar. What predicament! All prisoners, of course, the first class should be exposed to death; the old heck who ducks himself under senility and false probity, aham, to disgrace me; nobody will know that the execution decree was made in the darbar and they will say old Thangal is blood-thirsty and I executed all the prisoners; he'll also bear the brunt, Kotwal, Kotwal Koireng, Ganga Das shall also die with his son on the execution grounds at Ningel."

At the bird cage like gate one sardar shouted, "All prisoners are to be moved to the following place, Shangaibrou execution-

ground, Doyananda at Shangaitrou, Pangoi at Iroishemba, Toijamba Mitlao at Lillong, Thambal at Wangkhei Pungiao, and the lady to be left off after whipping." The Yubarajah saw the stare in their face, painted figures with black and big eyes.

The sardars dragged the rebels to their execution-grounds. "Koireng, that Sawaijamba, as I told before, is ducking low, a slow and sluggish old heck enable to cope with anything if he were here, no action could be taken up and now Sir Chandrakirti would be able to sleep soundly under the roof," old Thangal said.

"Ipu, I don't like the Sarkar's help, we could defend ourselves without their help," Tekendrajit said as they trotted towards their execution-grounds in the night.

Tekendrajit's eyes carried faces of the doomed rebels waiting their executions near the bird-cage gate; "Why did they die, the gallant followers of Ganga Ram, the Irengba Thundangba! Of course they died for their motherland! Their war cries rang in his ears, stop grabbing of land by the Firingis, hate the kite dress, no more Anglicisation!" They also died on the execution-grounds with pride of the feeling of the people burning in their hearts, for a cause the people cherished. They died for a cause and I too die for the same cause, he thought. Who is that veiled lady, Tekendrajit asked himself; the daughter-in-law of Ganga Ram; Sawaijamba told her story; she was found caressing the wounds of her husband on the execution-ground in the pitch dark night; her husband was already hecked to pieces; could caresses of a loving wife bring her dead husband's memory; a sardar mistook her for a rebel and threw a spear to her on that pitch dark night but missed.

The Gawal aarati bell pealed with crisp and mellow sound at the aarati; his mother called her son's name at the evening prayer time while his mother stayed with him; gong, gong went the gigantic brass bell of Lord Govinda. Could my mother remember the calls that she made to me on that unforgettable evening, he thought as he emerged out of the great western gate; outside the gate he was confronted with a vast multitude of human waves lamenting the loss of a prince. The lamentations subdued his weakness; the security forces tightened their cordons, each British soldier with rifle and bayonet. Is it not an auspicious day, tillaks on the forehead, he thought. Of course, he was going on a national errand!

Poor Chaobhal may rescue me but it may cause further bloodshed among my people, I die for my land, another rescue will bring more misery, he thought. The scaffold stood against the red evening sky, the manilla ropes dancing in the August breeze; Col. Evans stood with two hundred sepoy of 1st and 2nd Gurkha rifles and another two hundred of the 43rd Gurkha Rifles in parade at the site of the scaffold, one hundred fifty on the northern side, another one hundred fifty on the southern side. Fifty sepoy escorting Yubarajah and another fifty escorting Thangal stood at the site of the scaffold; a great lamentation rose in the evening air; women beat their bosoms and some fell unconscious hysterically; a veiled woman emerged from the crowd and rushed towards the scaffold but could not go further. "See yourself, what my husband felt at the time at Ningel!" she shouted as women around restrained her. The final step to the scaffold, a breath, a life, a memory. Tekendrajit put his steps with firmness on the stairs and old Thangal climbing the same with a bent back. The wailing rose with so much shrill voice that nothing could be heard. The white mourning phaneks wore the macabre look of shrouds like the storm sped past the vast stretch of lillacks. Pin-drop silence ensued with manilla rope putting around the prince's head and his crimson silk turban flew in the gritty August breeze; Chaobhal looked as the English sergeant put the rope around General Thangal's neck and to his surprise he saw the Yubarajah's legs moving. His eyes saw swarms of glow-worms and he reeled; the gritty August wind did the trick. His dhoti flew in the wind.

"No," cried Chaobhal with a sharp grunt; it was the August wind that moved at that moment not the Yubarajah's legs.

A shrill cry rent in the air and the drop fell.

CHAPTER II

Prince Tekendrajit cherished his title of Kotwal and he went on saying that he would never part with the title : he walked in his well-furnished drawing-room, his legs moving leaden, a depression-laden silent petulance. Flowers of red, violet and yellow colours, love for life, a mother's love acted like the graffiti in the young prince's mind; a grandiloquent talk, his acquired habit, his show of prowess hurtling in the air like the ace acrobat, his jaguar-like slim body fencing like a mad prince in the thick of the battle gave him the pleasure that his childhood strangement from his mother gave the legacy. He placed some takhellei flowers on the pedestal before his mother's photo from his cupped hands. Fuming his breaths violently and beating his heart like the gusts on the troubled sea, he said, "I want to do something that is spectacular. And to please my mother!" Bowing his head, his heart lived in communion with his mother. Her words on the day of her leaving the palace dinned his ears, "My son, Koireng, do what you think right and fear not the least in this wide, wide world. Alone you are in this world, not a single brother you have, of your own blood but I am not leaving far from you, not far from the palace and this palace has become the hellish prison to me, you live in the palace and a time will come for you and me. But you don't ask me questions and so fare-well!"

Young Tekendrajit did not forget the scene and to his surprise, he found that he was a reject in the world and in the walled palace. Without speaking a word he walked out of his room Chaobhal, his attendant followed him behind and he put the saddle on his master's chestnut horse. The prince did not look back nor blink his eyes. He looked like one possessed. With the green hilt sword the prince trotted along the silver-oak lined cobbled path. "Sanakhwa, where to-day?" his attendant asked as he rode on his pony. The prince did not say anything but he cantered towards the western gate. One seeing the prince riding towards the gate the sentries rushed towards the huge gate and knelt before him as he passed under the huge gate. Riding along the palace moat towards the residency, he rode past James who also came on his white horse with his sons and wife.

"Good afternoon, prince," James said to the passing prince.

But the prince did not even turn his head towards the Political Agent who suddenly flew into a rage. The prince did not respond to the ritual nor did he salute the white man. "Hell this fourth prince," James said with an admonishing look, "he turns out quite nasty," His wife looked at her husband with a genial face and said, "James, don't pay heed to the native princes." "These Oriental princes are the least decent and never take the trouble of giving salutes to the white rulers. And this prince should be taught a good lesson, His Highness shall be informed this very evening. See this time, and what Mr. McCulloch says at my last briefing turns out quite prophetic!" he shouted

"James, what you expect from the natives", his wife said as she rode towards the Sanakeithel. She knew that her husband won't do anything without making the young prince reprimand to him and that his words worked like the hands of a clock.

James sent his secretary, Chunder Singh, pattering his leather shoes on the cobbled path; his beard nicely trimmed, tallish and bespectacled, he walked with his measured gaits from the northern gate of the residency to the western gate of the palace, only eightyfive and hundred paces along the palace-moat. His visits presage something that His Highness toothaches. He walked past the Top Garod and he nodded at the sentries at the gate of the citadel.

"A letter from the Political Agent," Chunder Singh said as he bowed before His Highness and he handed over the letter to the clerk. His Highness nodded with a benigned smile and beckoned him to sit on a nearby chair saying, "Agent sahib, is he in an excellent health, I hope so, Chunder Singh?"

He said with a courteous smile, "His Highness the Political Agent is quite fine. It is a letter from him and he makes his request to Your Highness to send Prince Tekendrajit, the fourth prince to the residency with General Thangal, to-day or tomorrow morning."

"What happened, Chunder Singh?" His Highness inquired with his eyes straining.

"His Highness, not so serious matter," he replied in a sedate but firm voice, "The Kotwal slighted the Agent sahib on the way by not saluting him while riding on the road." Chunder Singh said with his face withdrawn, "the Political Agent wants to see

the Kotwal and to make him reprimand to him for discourtesy shown to him."

"Well, Chunder Singh, you may leave now, I will send the Kotwal to the residency," Sir Chandrakirti said with an admonishing look and he turned his face away. The private secretary bowed and left the chamber. His Highness did not say anything but his reticence was more than he could bawl out in sheer anger. "Call Ipu Thangal at once," he said to his attendant "I wish a good relation with the residency and the sarkar but my fourth son does not care anything, the petty whims of James should not be slighted at any cost. Kotwal throws everything in the cinder!" His brownish eyes looked stern and with scant puffs of the tobacco pipe, he rose from the raised chair with a heavy jerk and left the chamber. "This fourth son does take after me, not a single hair and it is only through his mother's infidelity that he slips through my fingers!" he said angrily as he paced outside his chamber, and he saw Thangal racing on the Sanggai-phamang. "Ipu Thangal is coming to see me and let him come into my inner chamber, and I feel so unwell." His armed retainers stood in front of his inner chamber and allowed the old general to enter the room.

The old general saw His Highness, much to his chagrin that His Highness was seized with shaking palsy; his face swollen and reclining on his bed. "Ipu, it is all hog-wash to mend the fourth prince," Sir Chandrakirti bawled out shaking his hands, "to-day, Chunder Singh, private secretary, came to me and said that Kotwal Koireng should be sent to his office."

"His Highness, for what, may I beg, to send a prince to an Agent?" Thangal asked screwing his eyebrows and waiting His Highness' reply.

"Ipu, the Agent Sahib wants to make my fourth prince reprimand to him in his office for showing discourtesy to him while riding on the road with his wife," Sir Chandrakirti said with his hand touching his forehead.

"His Highness, be comfortable on the bed, I shall carry out His Highness's hukum," Thangal said and bowed touching his head on the carpet-floor. He left the chamber and paced on the courtyard of the palace on his hobnailed boots and went to the palanquin waiting for him. "Go to the Loitong sanggai," he said

to his palanquin-bearers," "that Jongson's soul never rests till he discovers a cock-and-bull story for Sanaton and me, the octogenarian! Bah, poor colonel! But the Kotwal must be briefed before his encounter with the colonel. But it is quite sceptical to give direction to the prince; he has all the make-ups of a prince."

Thangal stopped at the gate of the Loitong sanggai and he saw Kotwal's attendants who were sitting near the gate. "Meechao Lallup and Heikha Chaoba, is your master inside his sanggai?" he asked with angry puffs of tobacco from his pipe. Bowing their heads, they replied, "Sanakhwa is inside and may we do anything for the general?" "No, lallups, have your time," he said and rode towards the prince sanggai.

"The septuagenarian and the Kotwal walk and think together," the people used to say quite often, "because the prince grew on his lap when he was abandoned by his mother." After a few minutes, the lallups saw the old general and the Kotwal riding on horses engaged in merry conversations; the young prince's long hairs fall on his back and flew in the air, his face reckless and daring putting up a derring-do manner, his chestnut horse cantered on the road flanked by long rows of mangoes and other tall trees. The old general called up his courage to face the white man and he looked at the young prince with a beaming smile and nodded his head; he became quite fearless when he rode with the Kotwal, and he was quite happy to see that this grooming of the prince would make up his falling strength at his seventies.

"Ipu, what Jongson would say to me, I hate that man, sneering and sniffing the cold air, and he has the least compunctions for this land, a soldier not a ruler, I know him at the first sight," the prince said to the old general as they rode along the palace moat.

"Sanaton, a bull fights at the first sight, the devil never sleeps, what the devil is driving at, a good shit would do no more good!" the old man guffawed looking at the Kotwal! Both rode lazily towards the northern gate of the residency, and they stopped at the gate. The old general dismounted from the palanquin, the Kotwal from his chestnut horse. The sentry gave a smart salute by tapping on the butt of his rifle. Both walked towards the Political Agent's office.

Red livery-coated chapprassis greeted the Kotwal and the

general and led them into James' office. The Kotwal walked tall and erect in front of the old general who, overweighed by his age and the long silk achkon and Pakhangba-insignia printed dhoti, his gaunt eyes saw nothing save the idea, vision that he saw in his youth. Old memories followed him. The prince tapped his boots holding his head high and he said to himself, "Why this man wants me to do, this man who shadows me where ever I go!"

"Good morning, Colonel," Thangal said, brightening his eyes and he shook hands with James.

"Morning, major," he said and he encountered his eyes with the Kotwal's and he held out his hand to the prince and said, "How do you do, prince?" "Fine, Agent sahib," the prince replied.

"Please take your seats," James said as he held out his hand, and he looked at the old general saying "How is your health, Major?"

"Each year adds new ailments and there is no new one at present," Thangal said with a wry laughter.

The Kotwal put up his face deeply engaged in his own whims, his eyes encountered the bluish eyes of the Agent. His transferent eyes looked like ghoulish eyes. Behind his chair, his leather horse-whip hung from a nail on the wall and slithered like the gold tipped tobacco-pipe of his father; a viper wriggling in the air rasping for human blood in the darkness of night! His eyes turned from the viper-like whip to the ghoulish eyes of the Agent, cold like the steel; he could not hear what the general exchanged words between them. The summer heat almost exploded his head under the turban, an itching uneasiness all over his body and he moved his neck like the wriggling of a viper.

"Young prince, you are the fourth prince?" James bawled out "you dishonour the Queen's vice regal in this state on the public thoroughfare. His jaws projected in disgust; staring at the young prince with a sullen look; he waited what the young prince reacted. The Kotwal's black eyes met his but he did not lift his lips; he looked like one possessed. The prince's face grimaced and contorted like one in a nightmare His lips trembled like a child and his mind showed agitation and he suddenly rose from the chair and cried out, "No, you white man, I hate you and your clan. I, who is Sir Chnadrakirti's son. The fourth prince, you call

me like a figure! Am I a figure, a lifeless number, Agent sahib, don't you know how to address a prince, the son of Sir Chandrakirti, the Maharajah of Manipur. I tell you, the son of Sir Chandrakirti should be addressed as "His Royal Highness Prince Tekendrajit Bir Singh." You are a colonel and you should salute me the moment you see me a prince that I am."

The old general looked at the young prince raising his hand to restrain him quite unconsciously, his mouth agape. It happened all of sudden and it was beyond all the expectation of the general who tutored him how he should encounter the bull-like British resident. "Sanaton, Sanaton," he cried out feebly as if in a nightmare, his eyes moistened with water. What he did was quite futile, the young prince yelped and yelped shouting, "you disgrace me in front of my brother! You infidels, you better leave this holy land, leave this holy land to Sir Chandrakirti!" The Kotwal became more menacing, held the table and thumped on it violently shouting "Leave this Holy land!" And he strutted on the corridor tapping his boots. The red livery coated chappassis rushed out of the corridor and stood quite helpless looking at the young prince who jumped on his chestnut horse and jumped over the wooden gate. Thangal sat almost stuck on the chair saying, "Sanaton, Sanaton, what is all this? I could not do anything, Agent sahib. This young prince is just like an untamed stallion!" James sat quite helpless holding a pen in his trembling hand, his eyes shooting like red hot steel. "Major Sahib, what is all this? Something must be done to check the fourth prince lest, Major Sahib, I fear the future of this state may be at stake! Just now I am sending a strong protest to His Highness."

James rose from his chair and said, "Major Thangal, thank you." They shook hands with the old general.

"Hell, I got a lot of intelligence on this fourth prince from his tutor, Mr. Mc Culloch, ...son of a lewd mother and he will prove ruin of the state and one day the friendship between the Queen and His Highness will snap, had not this unruly prince been banished from this state!" James bawled out to Chunder Singh, the private secretary who stood watching him.

The old general left the residency puffing placid smoke on his palanquin; he rode along the palace moat and he saw the kuts watching the old general riding his palanquin so gently and so

happily. The old general was quite happy at heart. But could he express it to his attendants? No. Jongson should be taught a good lesson, he said to himself : could he administer rebuke to a prince, it was the most fantastic. The old general smiled as he rode towards the western gate of the palace, only one hundred eighty five steps. At the gate he saw Prince Angousana and Jillangamba waiting him.

"What happened Ipu?" Prince Angousana asked in a whispered tone near the old general's ears.

"Prince, a lot to talk," the old general replied with a wry smile.

Both rode to the royal office without a word; the lallups and kuts standing nearby eaves-dropped, got the hints and they found that the Kotwal rode out of the residency like a man being chased by the native sepoy of the 44 G.R. But the old general said nothing at the gate casting doubts on the whole affairs. The lallups and kuts, the old general knew, would not tolerate any insults meted out to the Kotwal.

The young prince did not ride on the road between the residency and the palace except on rare occasions and he tried to avoid James as far as possible. But the news that the Political Agent was insulted by the Kotwal became talk of the palace and the gossip-mongers of the Sanakeithel. The incident added a new feather to the prince's turban and enhanced his stature among the princes. But the people whispered among themselves, "The old general has groomed the young prince as the champion of the rising new princes in the British dominated states who egg on conspiring against the Queen's empire." The prince did not attend the darbar nor the palace office but he was seen riding his chestnut horses with his bunch of tough swordsmen and musketeers; he went on subduing the country youths defying the orders of Sir Chandrakirti.

The afternoon came with the Bilingsgate colloquy and the chattering of the market-goers at the Sanakeithel; Naobi and Nembi were seen among the market-goers with some chappassis from the residency. The two young ladies were almost James' slaves; the girls were sent to the residency from the palace to do the odds and bits in the residency. It was a nice treat to the bachelor British residents who, sometimes kept them as concubines.

"Memsahib, what happened to the prince," one lady stall

keeper asked Naobi with a wan smile.

She looked at the lady with a beaming smile but she went on coaxing her to give her reply. "Sahib said, Emma, wait time I shall teach the fourth prince a good lesson," she said after much coaxing, "the rest I didn't listen to." She left the stall with Nembi to another stall.

"But, they won't know, the people love the prince after the incident like a God sent one," said the fat lady.

The beat of drums sounded nearer and nearer. A small crowd followed a fallen woman on the road along the palace moat; the crowd approached the market when it was at its peak. Striped to the waist, her bosom painted with yellow turmeric and lime, she was led past the Sanakeithel. The royal official chanted ceaselessly, "Listen, listen, a woman caught with her paramour and her child strangled to death, look this woman, look and look this woman!" She walked barefoot and she was barely in her twenties. The drum sounded with its muffled sounds. Children screamed and scuttled towards their homes. "Kill her, kill her along with her husband and expose her with the man on the execution ground like a common thief or a murderer," the ladies shouted raising their voice, clenching their fists. A woman rushed out and spat on the ground. She became hysterical shouting, "You entrails of dogs, you deserve your fate, you kill your kid born out of stolen pleasure."

"Where is the man, her husband?" the woman asked the royal officer with a turban,

"He goes to Sugnu for exposition to death," the turbaned officer replied in a slow matter-of-fact tone.

The two residency maids left the market-place quite shaken on seeing the bare-bosomed fallen woman. James' warning to all the inmates of the residency was "No talk with the outside women. The shrewd Agent even forbade them to go outside the precincts of the residency. She talked about the exposition of the fallen woman among the house-maids in subdued whispers. On the next day, James bawled out to Chunder Singh, his private secretary "Chunder Singha, you go to His Highness and tell him that the woman and her paramour should be sent to the residency office and I want to hear the case myself. No! you imagine that a man should be executed for illicit relations with a woman, be it

an infanticide!" James wrote a letter hastily and handed over to his secretary.

Chunder Singh went to the palace on his foot along the silver-oak lined road along the palace moat.

James walked in the garden with his mistress, Emma and his sons, Dick and Edward. "Emma, what I want in this little kingdom is that I want a thorough reform of the judicial system and take out the sting out of it." he said bending towards her, "all the same, I wish I could have abolished the same! You see you are the only lady of the pure English blood who has trodden on this land!"

Emma looked at her husband in wonder and blinked her eyes, "James, is to so? Laws are quite different here, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. Like the ancient England!"

"The ministers should consult me before carrying out any sentence of death," James said beaming his eyes, "the native kings say their laws are unalterable, we cannot change, so and so, but some day there will be a case accompanied by circumstances of cruelty, when I shall be obliged to interfere."

James heard the case himself and he sent a letter to His Highness saying that it was an advice, not a hukum that the man should not be executed for such a petty matter lest his justice might be tinged with cruelty not seen elsewhere in the civilised European countries.

"What is the Agent sahib upto?" General Thangal bawled out to General Balaram, it will infringe on our judicial system, is it not, general?"

"General, almost a departure! But if it helps His Highness, and if it is a suggestion why should we not take it, it is not an imposition," he replied blinking his eyes.

"General, such an interference, Jongson says, his friendly remonstrance. We may accept it or may not accept it. Please think over. That Jongson used to poke nose in the past and shall do so in future also. Such breed never rests his soul till his words are carried out," Thangal said with an angry voice, "let us see what he is upto and with this I stop speaking on the matter."

Borachaoba and Dinachandra said nothing but they looked at the issue from a different angle. They were too meek to say

anything that would prejudice General Thangal and His Highness.

Dinachandra looked at Borachaoba and shook his head gently in a token of disapproval and he, suddenly stopped lest his stance on the issue might be espied by His Highness' attendants. He rose from his chair and walked away wearing a sullen look and he intentionally avoided others' company because the people would think that he was conspiring with others for king-making. He sensed that the recent meddling by the Political Agent would incense more discontent among the people. "Oh, Lord, James has a finger in the pie," he said to himself as he walked, bending his head low, his hands clasped behind his back. The sounds of the kuts shouting "Left-right" in red shirts and short pants dinned his ears. His sons talked about the slogans "Hate kite dress, stop grabbing of land, stop anglicisation!" Ushaba bowed his head low and said, "Sir, what make you so sad, and any hukum that you can't bear?" "Oh, no lallup-chingba, a man needs some days to walk with his head low, not indulged in gay thoughts, is it not so, Ushaba?" "It is the age, Sir," Ushaba said in reply. But he sensed that the recent interference in the case of the fallen woman and her paramour's commutation from execution caused a flutter in the corridors of power in the palace. Dinachandra left past the Top Garod without a word.

The Sanakeithel was at its peak; coarse cotton-dhoti clad salt-manufacturers from Ningel had already arrived at the market-place with their merchandise of salt cakes on the bamboo-poles. They haggled with the women of the Sanakeithel about the prices and they sat on the raised platform of the market-place after vending their merchandise. Thambal came riding a pony and tethered the animal on the other side of the dusty road. He sat on the green grass and watched towards the western gate of the palace. The afternoon sunshine became mellow as the summer breeze blew gently across the meadow of Pheida Pung. Ladies clad in sparkling silk striped phaneks did marketing at the stalls and left carrying the things. The salt venders left the market-place but they could not go straight to Ningel. They went to their acquaintances and relatives to pass the night for their journey next day.

Angangmacha, a brahmin emerged from the crowd at the market-place and he walked towards Thambal. With a subdued, lingering smile, he said, "How do you do, Sir?" Thambal bowed

to the brahmin and replied," Aige, with the grace of God, I am blessed with one meal in a day."

"Don't forget Lord Krishna, and the rest is His will," Angangmacha said as he sat down beside him. "You are a well-to-do man at Ningel, the Lord blesseth you."

"What is the news?"

"News about what?"

"About the palace affairs, we work day and night extracting salt from water and what we learn about the place around us," Thambal said looking at the man.

"The Kotwal was administered rebuke for not saluting the Agent sahib, and too much inference in the justice department by the latter," he said as he sat cross-legged on the ground.

"What do the people say about it?" he said.

"His Highness mortgaged the land to Lord Northbrook at the Jilla darbar," he replied

"Of course," he said with a grunt.

"Hate the kite dress, no more grab of land, no more anglicisation, the people went on crying," Angangmacha chortled.

"You shall be the head cook, so that you can feed your children," Thambal said in a lingering voice. "but you must watch the ins and outs of the palace, mind that, we want to save the land from the hands of the white rulers."

The red sun dipped behind the blue hills in the west and the fire-brands lit the western gate and the kuts in black uniforms walked out of the western gate. The women vendors walked in rows with oil fire-brand along the road between the palace and the residency towards Wangkhei and others towards the China bridge over the Nambul river.

"See, these are the mothers of the common people in this land, they feed what they earn at the Sanakeithel and reaching homes, they husk paddy and cook their meals for the young sons," Thambal said.

Darkness wrapped the place save the trails of firebrands branching out in two directions. The huge temple bell pealed and pealed. Both bowed their heads and left the place towards the China bridge. With the bridle in his hand, Thambal walked

beside the brahmin talking to his companion in whispers.

"King-making is as easy as grooming a girl for a bride," Thambal said jocularly.

"Sir, please say as difficult as making a girl a bride for a bridegroom whom she does not love," Angangmacha, the brahmin chortled looking at Thambal with a cunning smile as they walked past the gory-looking tree on the execution-ground. The sound of the current of the river-water at the corner of the China-brick bridge was suddenly disrupted by the sound of hooves coming towards them. The royal princes came riding towards the palace in the evening darkness. Angangmacha withdrew in fear lest he might be trampled by the horses and he knew well that the front rider was no other than Kotwal Tekendrajit who, unlike all the students of Bedam, the horse master had a unique style of riding. This, he could see in the darkness of the night and while he strained his eyes the last of the bunch of rider bumped against him and the rider turned back and whipped him on his face crying, "Hei, why don't see the Kotwal is passing on this road!"

The brahmin reeled with blindness in the darkness, while the last rider gave him smacking sound of lashes.

"Who are you, tell me?" he cried as he pulled the bridle in front of the reeling man.

"Sire, we are the peasants, servants' of Srijut!" Thambal shouted back as he held the hilt of his sword in the darkness. He gasped for breaths as his companion stooped and grouped in the darkness.

The royal horseman cried out, "Well then, why you walk in front of the Kotwal, you go ahead!" and he cried "Hei ho." He galloped towards the palace and joined the prince near the gate of Borachaoba.

The brahmin threw himself on the road-side with his hand on his eyes reeling in the darkness; a gashing wound on his face with drops of blood trickling on his cotton shirt made him blind. Thambal tended to his wound on his face and said, "Angangmacha, what happened to you?" The poor man crouched covering his eyes with his hands and he opened his eyes towards the Nambul road past the flooding water and saw the shadows of the firebrands carried in the hands of the vegetable venders of the Sanakeithel; it looked like a star exploded in the vast firmament. Thambal lifted him on his horse and rode off towards the hillock of Chinga

along the Nambul river.

Thambal dismounted from his horse and lifted the wounded brahmin from the horse; he walked towards the verandah calling "Master, master, something had happened." It was the big thatch-roofed house of Gangaram; he placed the man on the vernadah and waited anxiously. "What happened, Thambal, I hear your voice?" his son said as he opened the door; he held a sword and shield in his hand.

"It was the Kotwal's slaves who bled this poor brahmin!" Thambal said with his palm raising in a token of helplessness.

Gangaram's inmates of his house took him inside the house; his wife, Jubati made a hue and cry saying "The cruel beating had started again; time is the best judge; let us wait time and God is the witness!"

Her daughter-in-law made a make-shift bed for the brahmin in a room; her husband shouted to his neighbour to send a brahmin to cook meals for the injured man who, being a brahmin caste would not take food from a kshetriya. The visit of a comet cast a lurid glance in the eyes of the people surrounding the wounded man. Ladies of the Sanakeithel forecast bloody battles among the princes, holocaust and gossip-mongers sitting on the grass of the Pheida Pung in the afternoon talked about the imminent portent of death of kings or some noble men in the land. A Borachaoba or a Wangkheirakpa! The cry of "Hate kite dress, no more grab of land, no more anglicisation!" filled the sylvan land of Manipur.

Thambal cried, "This land is going to be taken over by the British sarkar." His bosom heaved looking at the poor wounded man. His dislike of Sir Chandrakirti became a household-word in the land. Srijut is a slave of the Viceroy and the Queen, he said to himself. Of course, the Kotwal could save the land, he is the arch-enemy of the sarkar, he continued in silence. He became the connecting link between the rebel-chief and the villages of Andro, Shikhong and the outlying villags beyond the ten-faced hills of the Nongmaiching. He rode to the nook and corner of far-off hills in the purple valley seeking of guns, arrows and swords. Forges were lit day and night and the billows sounded like wounded gaints. Stockades were constructed in the dead of night; Kamu was fortified and the peasants sang glory of the land

The gigantic wooden drum of Andro sounded plaintive appeals to the peasants of the surrounding villages, the time to sit and think together and remember that they had a mother, the common mother-land. They sang, she had her green sari embroidered with the golden sheafs of the ripe paddies, and the silvery lake her ornaments; she walked and walked quite unseen among the whispers of the tall pine trees, she sat on the foot of the big golden peepul trees.

"That Sir Chandrakirti is a man of contradictions, slave to himself, slave to his sensual pleasure and a greater slave to Queen Victoria!" his master chanted on the heaths of Pheida pung, on the market place of the Sanakeithel and on the mandavs of the villages. "Of course, who is the Queen? What is she to us, poor peasants having a single meal in a day! Should she rule my motherland from the island four seas across! Sir Chandrakirti is her chosen son and so decorated him with titles, knighthoods and star-cross to him!"

"Thambal, come and shout inside the closed doors of the room because the kings have ears on the wall!?" his master's wife told him with her hand gesturing to him to come.

"Mother, the cinder has caught fire and the wild fire has spread from tree to tree, sheaf to sheaf, mouth to mouth till the whole conflagration!" Thambal said as he went inside the room.

"Hai, Thambal don't you hear that the mythical tailed star brings death to the princes and kings," she said, her hands patting his shoulder and "only wait time and those who are evil-doers let them bear the burden and why we, poor folks should raise the hell."

Her eyes looked through the dim lit-room and her voice rang out "Tell me, tell me! Am I waiting time? Every human being has the right of a comfortable life, and the right to correct an errant king! What happened to Pamheiba who came to throne, burning puranas, killing our Gods and our souls! Where are our Gods, even the Gods fled this land! Don't you know the dog will eat on the golden plate! Do you know the import of the words? Tell me, tell me."

The lady threw herself on the mora while the man looked at her in astonishment.

"Of course, this is a tale waiting for meals," she said with a smile

looking at her daughter-in-law who spread the rice on the plates.

Thambal had a peaceful slumber under the roof of his master along with the poor brahmin; the rain drizzled in the darkness of the night. The turbulent water of the Nambul river glided over the muddy beds towards the silvery lake of Logtak, singing the song of a sad tale through the sleepy villages. With the first caw of the black crows he harnessed his horse and galloped along the banks of the Nambul river and crossed the wooden bridge over the Imphal river at Sanjenthong; on the way he galloped past the execution ground of the Wangkhei and he dismounted from his horse and pissed on its precincts. He trotted through the rows of thatched houses listening to the soft music of morning, chirping of nightingales and multitudes of sparrows. The night rain had washed the dust from the leaves and grasses and the sun shone with the brilliance of beaten gold.

“Of course, the old man is quite dependable who chants his slogans against the Queen and Sir Chandrakirti. But what about the hairy thick eye-browed cook who claimed to be the holiest of the holy?,” he said to himself. “There is the wounded brahmin who follows his master to become the royal cook once his master overthrows Sir Chandrakirti and another at the new camp at Kamu who started cooking for the rebel-peasants. Once there was any inkling of what was concieved, his master was quite aware of his fate; exposition to death on the grounds of Ningel, Shikhong, Wangkhei-pungjao and Wangthonbi and Lalhambung. Could his children and wife be spared? But the Vaishnavite kings profess no cruelty to women, babies and cows! Am I treading a path besmeared with blood, the life-giving and the life-saving liquid of life and pleasure!” he mused himself. Gangaram sowed seeds of rebellion around the ten-faced hills of Nongmaiching : His words rang in his ears while he galloped and galloped. Far from the hills he saw the shining top of Lord Govinda’s temple in the morning sunshine. His heart throbbed as the long rays of the sun played the magic of colour and light on the nearby mango trees and the far velvety sheets of the sides of hills. He stopped still on the horse back and turned his back and said, “Yonder lies the heart of the land and see how the people enslaved themselves silently and how they found themselves quite blind to the unseen works silently wrought by Sir Chandrakirti,” he said to himself and “see the British sarkar and the mercenaries are going to rob

the mother-land of the diamond necklaces from her neck!" His ears were filled with the pecking sounds of wood-peckers, pristine and pure as life itself. The king-fisher pecked and pecked making a nest, a home in a sky-touching tree, to lay eggs, to rear kids. Do birds need nests to nurse their kids? Kids are for posterity and posterity is for the kids! he said looking at the surrounding trees and forests. He heaved a sigh as he stood on a ridge of the Nongmaiching hills while the breeze wafted through the branches of trees.

Thambal reached Ningel at the meal-time; all the salt-makers left their springs for their meals.

The slogan went on from house to house; the followers of Gangaram went house to house preaching of a free land. "Hate the kite dress, Firingis should not grab lands! No more anglicisation!" his followers orchestrated their cry against Sir Chandrakirti. Could he raise the cry against him openly, his followers asked. Of course, could you cover a fire by a clothe, they replied with their sleepy eyes looking at the sceptics. The rebel-leader went from pillar to post in search of guns and swords. In search of men who would stick to the last. He spoke optimistic words like all leaders who professed an uprising. To be a ruler of a tribe, a community or land he had the verve and optimism and the gut. He loved his followers and held rendezvous in his hide-out in the forest-covered Kamu. One could take cover in the many bosoms of the nine-faced hills of the Nongmaiching.

"Why should Sir Chandrakirti offer nazar to the sarkar," Gangaram cried out in anguish.

His followers sat on the courtyard as he preached sitting on a mora. The followers listened to his harangue, enraptured by his oration punctuated by breathlessness due to volcanic speech. "Hate the kite dress. Stop grabbing of land!" he said at the top of his voice, "but a few rifles and bows and arrows could liberate this land from Sir Chandrakirti and his dozen of princes coming from his loins and then we fight the British sarkar." His disbelief in the British as ruler of the land was his obsession. The Maharajah started issuing short pants to his kuts and making parades in the British style; James visited the royal parade ground one morning and inspected the passing parade commanded by Sir Chandrakirti himself. The astute Political Agent smiled a victorious smile. His oft-quoted "No, no, no," was the twiddle-twaddle but it was the

imperial threat to Sir Chandrakirti. He laughed himself saying "The conquest of this land can be made without raising a rifle." His words, 'No! no! no!' were like the sound of thunder pealing in the morning.

Gangaram orchestrated the malady of the land. One day, he rode along the bank of the Nambui river and on crossing the river on the China bridge near the gory-looking tamarind tree near the river, he saw a youth exposed on the execution-ground; he stood gazing on the helpless dead body bound on the stakes; his long hairs flew in the air quite relentlessly. He saw the patches of blood on his thick cotton short and flies sucking the juice from his body. Two or four kuts sat on the ground and played dices without paying any heed to the people looking at the dead man. An icy coldness swept over his body. "Did not Garibniwaz spear his father to death by hired assassins only for the throne of this land?" he said to himself, "Has he a heart? Precisely not, and has he another heart for his subjects? Of course not! He was done to death by his own son on the bank of the Irrawadi! They all come from the groins of their fathers who tended them on their laps. Inscrutable are the ways of king-makers; life or death and not alternative." He gazed his eyes vacantly on his staunch followers who flocked to him from the far villages. He clenched his fists, gasped for breaths and whined. His love for his motherland was innate, sensual, but mystical as well as pristine. He shouted at the top of his voice "Life or death, I have no other alternative! But what about the fate of a king-maker who dies with his son on the execution-ground?" He reeled his head and staggered on the ground. Toijamba rushed towards his master and stood by his side.

"Master, what happened?" he asked in a mumbled voice.

"No, man, something came over me," he chortled touching his bosom with fond affection sending electrical thrills among his followers. His son watched every move and sensed that a single traitor could spoil the whole plan and he went to Singsuba Ahal and whispered near his ears, "Of course, our leader is too much engrossed with the love of the motherland and it so happens that such a man could face death with a smile, and such man is sent by God, nobody else! He came over the illusion of life!"

"But do we need a safe place or shall we storm the palace?" his son asked with his eyes in consternation, "for king's ears are on

the wall."

One late night, Yubati whispered to his son, "Kanta, the jewel of my heart, your father's love for this land called Manipur, is so intense, so infathomable. But dearie, what would happen if the agent of Srijut has had an inkling of the whole affairs! A sudden swooping of the royal kuts with drawn swords led by the murderous General Thangal, extinction of the whole clan! No alternative! Where to escape with you and my youngest son?"

Her son, Angangjao listened with rapt attention, her mother fondly patting him on his shoulders.

"Kings have ears on the walls, it is better to keep the rendezvous more secret and well-timed and far and far from the din and bustle of this little town called Imphal," she said gazing on her son and her youngest son leaning on her with black and pensive eyes. She looked through the window and saw the tailed star and whispered to herself, "What omen or good tidings these heavenly bodies bring to the people of this land, and to me and my family!"

Hoofs of horses were heard in the darkness of night on the road and within a minute, Gangaram dismounted from his horse on the courtyard and Thambal took the bridle from him. Weary and haggard, he walked towards the verandah followed by his factotum. His face showed more as he sat on the raised chair. He spoke nothing but his alacrity in his eyes under the oiled lamp showed something which could not be ascertained in the whispered tones of his followers sitting around him.

Suleiman, the horse dealer from Comilla put up tents on the out-skirts of the Lamphel marshy land; horses galloped off on the green grass as soon as the sun shone and some frisked about on the endless expanse of the endless grassland. The horse dealer, elegant and soft-spoken and always with a fez sipped hot black tea as he looked at the horses. He came along with some one hundred or two hundred finest horses for sale in the grand mela in the royal pologround. Shamianas fluttered in the summer wind and the multi-coloured paper-works attracted a huge crowd on the day of opening of the mela.

The cannon boomed reverberating on the ground; announcing the inauguration of the grand mela and the band struck with waltz music. James Johnstone walked with Sir Chandrakirti on the red carpet and Emma, his wife walked with a Dorothy bag with her sons, Dick and Edward. Borachaoba and Dinachandra walked in their elegant silk achkons with the Maharajah towards the industries pavilion. James's eyes beamed with joy at the pressure lamp fabricated by the iron-smiths of the palace. "Agent sahib, these lamps are made entirely by my artisans and once they are given the training they could make like others," Sir Chandrakirti said with a smile.

"His Highness, indeed your artisans are quite excellent," the Agent said, his nasal and chirping tone made by-standers looked with awe at him who stood towering over them. Emmas' eyes caught the ivory works and gold embroidered chaddars, ivory fans, "Aeeis and ahs," she went on saying looking at these Oriental crafts. Yubarajah Surchandra and almost all the younger princes, Pakkasana, Thambousana, Jhalakirti walked in flowing silks whenever the Maharajah went. The Kotwal did not appear at the scene; as usual he shuned away James' company since the last meeting in the latter's office at the residency. Just allergic to see the face of the Agent who sneers every time he saw him. On the other end of the royal polo-ground he was seen broncho-busting the chestnut horse he purchased from Suleiman, the horse dealer. Heikha Chaoba and Chaobhal were running on the ground after the horse. Sweating and cursing, the prince rode the horse at break-neck speed until the sulky horse stuck its front legs abruptly on the sticky ground and with sullen looks, he shouted at the animal with lashing of horse-whips. Taming of the shrew is no less than taming of a young horse. The young prince was an adept in broncho-busting and he rode the horse like his master, Bedam. All drenched in sweat, the rider and the horse like one. The horse suddenly went off at the break-neck speed and it drew a huge crowd bigger than those at the pavilion. Old women and children and the kuts watched taming of the horse. "His master taught all he knew, the many tricks of a horse," an old lallup said to the crowd watching the scene. The prince galloped and galloped and the rider and the horse became one in the sweltering heat of May.

"Chaobhal, this chestnut horse yields to me now, and is there any horse which could disobey me," the prince said as he slowed

down near his attendant. Chu, chu, he cried at the animal and said, now you go. The animal sprung with a jerk nearly throwing away the rider; it struck its front legs sullenly and it cantered with the rider in the breeze. Off the horse galloped through the crowd again and the rider whipped and whipped with snapping sounds. The young horse made a round in the pologround and it returned to the starting point in drenched sweat with half breaths.

The grand mela went on as usual on the next day and the prince was seen taming the chestnut horse on the polo-ground until the dusk came. The mela-goers had already left. Darkness settled on the royal pologround. Whispered tones were heard in the zenana mahal that a dead body was left behind after the mela on that day. "Who did it? Who did it?" everybody cried. No response save fingers on the lips. The doors and windows of the nearby houses facing the royal pologround were shut and the oil-lamps were put out the houses were locked and no visitors were denied. On the cobbled road, the kuts whispered, "Sound of pummelling was heard and nobody smelt any foul play but somebody playing pranks in the night; sounds of yelling and shouting were heard in the darkness of the night. Not only that, the voices of many kuts were heard," said a kut as he walked past the rows of the houses. "But where is the Kotwal?" said another. "You damned, nimcompoop, don't talk loud. The Kotwal may overhear what we talk," said another kut in whispers. "But is it a fact that Paona, that gauche fellow is dead, and so too, Potshangba and Khaidiba! Slapping and beating with canesticks till they drooped dead!," the kut said in subdued tones.

At the residence of General Thangal, Sachipriya said, "Major, house-wives closed their doors saying that one unearthly creature stalks on the polo-ground and what happened?"

"Sachipriya, where is Mikoi, give my dress, I have to rush to the palace just now and call my palanquin-bearers at once." the old general said to his wife.

"What happened, major?"

"Nothing at all, don't let out my children outside my residence," he said with a grunting, dragging sound, "Where could I find Sanaton?"

The nights of hushed silence and whispers* went away so suddenly. Thangal and his son, Lamphel rushed to the palace.

Col. Shamu and Balaram were already in the chamber of Sir Chandrakirti; he sat on the raised chair with pillows. His face seemed swollen and haggard. Silence ruled the chamber. Prince Kullachendra entered the chamber and bowed his head touching the carpet-floor, and he sat on a nearby chair. "What is to do and what is Srijut's instruction in this matter, we are ready to follow it, let us pray for Sanaton, aham, so much headache is causing Srijut."

Sir Chandrakirti said nothing and he clutched his forehead with his fingers. He broke the silence saying "God has given me such a son, oh, my Koieng, how happy I was to see him coming into the world but the Kotwal and his mother are giving me so much trouble; Think Ipu, the Agent sahib will be mad to punish him. Ipu, I am no longer disappointed whatever my sons do, let them get the fruits!"

"Srijut, a kotwal is a kotwal, a police chief and the son of Sir Chandrakirti!" General Balaram said in a slow and sedate voice.

Thangal nodded his head in confidence and with his lips agape, he made a wry smile and said, "Srijut, please don't think over it in such your health, there are Prince Kullachandra, Prince Surchandra and Sawaijamba and Luwang Ningthou, no need to worry over such paltry matter."

In the morning it was found out that Paona, a youth in the service of the king was dead and his two other companions, Potshangba and Khaidiba were hospitalised in the residency hospital. Atomacha, the hospital attendant bragged on saying that the Kotwal would be in trouble. Why, the people around him asked in surprise. Because the Agent sahib would try the case like other cases. No comment from the bystanders in the hospital. They learnt that mother of the deceased lodged a complaint with the British resident.

James was in a rancorous mood on hearing that the Kotwal did the crime and he called Chunder Singh, his private secretary and said, "Hell, this time, the fourth prince murdered his attendant and seriously injured other two." As he bawled out, he thumped the table and his bluish eyes rolled on with owlsh blindness. His secretary stood listening to his angry words and Kundu stood near the doorway with a pencil and paper. "Why this hell-cat puts up a good trouble in this God-forshaken land! I called this

desperate prince for reprimand in my office for showing discourtesy to the viceregent of the Queen but he walked out of the office talking like a half-penny outraging the regent in his own office," he went on saying clenching his hands, "how did it all happen, Chunder Shigh?"

"That woman is not connected with the Kotwal," Chunder Sinch said in a matter-of-one tone.

"Then how?"

"The dead man's father told me that the Kotwal wanted to give the woman to his attendant, Haridas but she was eloped with the deceased and the Kotwal tied him and his two other companions on the pologround and slapped them for two hours and beat them with a cane-stick for several hours," he said.

"Chunder Singh, could all these things happen when one Political Agent is in the residency, just a stone's throw from the palace!" James blurted out with a sullen look, "just fantastic!"

James heaved a sigh as he supported his body on the back of the chair.

"Chunder Singh, you call the two injured and I just want to hear the case and Kundu, you go to the palace and tell His Highness that I will see the ministers to-day, go quickly," James said with an admonishing look.

James took no worthwhile time to call upon the ministers in the palace; on his white horse he trotted along the palace moat and within a few minutes he reached the darbar. All the ministers were already in the darbar and felt disconcerted at the sight of the tall Political Agent who was coming to meddle into the affairs of the state. Thangal sneered at his sight and he received the visitor with acerbity.

James sniffed the stifling air inside the darbar hall. "Good morning to you all," he said as he took a chair. He put up a stiff appearance and he looked at Thangal and said, "Major Thangal how did it happen that three royal retinues were flogged for two long hours in the night and one Paona died of flogging. Major sahib, what is all this?"

There followed an icy silence in the darbar; his eyes shifted from the old general to General Balaram and then to Col. Shamu, Prince Kullachandra and so on. All cast their looks with

their eyes vacant.

"Hon'ble ministers, an innocent man was flogged to death by the fourth prince on the day last before and two others are, at present, dangerously ill from the flogging. May I ask you all whether this is a fact or not? Please give your reply."

General Thangal rose from his chair and said "Agent Sahib, what does it matter to you, we have our own law and justice department to deal with the normal cases." A deep grunt followed his reply. He turned his face away from the British resident. The old man said "Agent sahib, the incident took place only one or days ago but do you think that the case could be prejudiced before being heard? No never, we have our law and justice department to look after all such petty matters."

James grouped after another question, "Hon'ble ministers, do you agree that the fourth prince did the mischief of flogging the innocent man to death and flogging another two on the royal pologround in the night? That also in presence of the so many of his retinues!"

"Agent sahib, whoever he may be, the case shall be heard no question of intentional delay to invite any public criticism," Thangal said, his thick eye-brows puckering.

"But do you agree that the fourth prince committed the murder? This is all I want to know." James almost shouted with anger.

"Agent sahib, I never saw him killing the man," Thangal said moving his head violently, "oh no, oh no."

"Major sahib, I took evidence on the subject on May 6, the night before last and found that the fourth prince had on the first instant beaten three men, I did not know their names and on my taking the evidence it was deposed that the fourth prince tied up one after the other and beat them most severely on the back and at the same time he pummelled them with fists and slaps on the face. The poor man died of shock after the beating and the other two severely ill."

"Agent sahib, Hon'ble Justice of the Chirap will be grateful to you," Thangal said with a wan smile, "for Agent sahib had already heard the case discharging their duties without their asking!"

"Major sahib, I am helping His Highness not to fall into

disgrace," James said blinking his eyes like a wronged school boy.

Thangal took a big bunch of paan from his silver casket and put it in his mouth.

"Agent sahib, you are interested in the case," Thangal quipped with a beaming smile.

"No major sahib, I want to save His Highness from disgrace!" James said.

"What disgrace Agent sahib?" he asked without interruption.

"Major sahib, displeasure from the Viceroy!" chortled James looking at the old man's eyes.

"How!"

"Once this case goes unnoticed;"

"How do you know that this murder case will go unpunished, Agent sahib, is it not a slur on the judiciary system of this land, the murder took place only one or two days ago, and Major sahib, you can't say that the accused will go scotfree," Thangal said with his white eyebrows puckering in a sullen look. Then he encountered his eyes with his munching his paan.

The darbar hall was filled with an uproar. James rose from his chair crest-fallen and he looked at the old general and said, "Dear friend, I am quite confident that man-slaughter should not go unpunished and this can't happen so long I am in this state."

General Thangal rose from his seat and he stood supporting his hands on his waist and with his unusual pursed lips, he looked around and said, "Agent sahib, your opinion will prejudice the case and we have our own courts and laws too. The case shall be heard by the Chief officials of the Cheirap and the murder case by His Highness."

The ministers looked at James with mawkish eyes and they lamented that the latter interfered in the laws of the land.

James left the darbar in total disgust.

After a few days, Kotwal Tekendrajit was exiled to the island of Thanga, a remote village in the middle of the Logtak lake. He was acquitted of the murder charge and punished for flogging the other two. A few of his nearest attendants went with him to the island. The shafts of the morning sunshine blinded him like

the sand storm. Eyes of the people popped out of their windows and doors to have a look at his disgrace; he trotted on the dusty road. Other people's looks seemed anathema to him. How his unfortunate mother suffered such looks in her life; the divorce from her husband and the wax-model plot and her final exit from the palace. It had its ever-lasting and pronounced effect on the young prince. Now he was exiled to the isle of Thanga, and he trotted along the road shunning his face from the people. He found himself shrunken and small like the mustard seed; the seed crying for love and warmth. He found numbness in his whole being. His mentor, General Thangal bid good-bye to him and he handed over a small bag of home-made sweets from his wife, Sachipriya.

"Pray to Lord Govinda, Sanaton, I will make Srijut to call you from your exile in no time," Thangal shouted to him out of sadness; his eyes moistened out of intense love for the young prince.

"Chunder Singh, who stirs the ember, neither you nor I? The fourth prince, Mr. Culloch says is unprincely and his banishment from this state will serve good for the state. A child is known from its drapery and napkins," James said with beaming eyes. He seemed quite happy at the news of the young prince's exile to the island. "But that old Thangal will do a trick," he said to his private secretary. The latter looked at the Agent but he did not say anything. His master burnt his fingers badly when he tried to vindicate the ministers that such a murder should not go unpunished; he took the case to the ministers out of jealousy. He played possum that the fourth prince would go unpunished for the murder. It was poppycock, Thangal said quite distraughtly to him in the darbar.

"Chunder Singh, just funny. The fourth prince is accused of assaulting the two but he was acquitted of murder. His Highness took the case by himself. The Kotwal threw the blame on the two survivors who he said had beaten the deceased. The defence is so exceedingly lame that I consider it as equivalent to his confession of his guilt," James bawled out in his office. "well, Chunder Singh, draft a letter to the Chief Commissioner of Assam that the unruly prince has been banished for man-slaughter and down-graded to a lower caste."

Chunder Singh sat down to write on a piece of paper and he

looked at his master with a docile smile saying "His Excellency."

"Baboo, you work so hard and you will get extra pay," James said as he held a pencil in his mouth.

Dick and Edward came with Emma on the carriage-drive and they saw James emerge out of his office. "Dad, that native prince with tulwar and musket is banished". Edward shouted to his father. "Tat, tat, tat," he shouted with his toy gun in his hand.

Emma and her husband smiled at his son.

"James, has the sea-passage to England been confirmed? Wish to land England in the middle of summer," Emma said as she stood near her husband.

"Emma, just arrived to-day," he said pouting his lips, "my first assignment to my political agency is over; the fourth prince is exiled and now it is pretty easy to pull the native Rajah by his sleeve".

After one week or so the Political Agent scheduled his departure from Manipur along with his wife, two sons and sister. Porters arrived at the palace for his transport to Mao, the last hill station of Manipur on the northern border. Thangal said at the brief ceremony of the Agent's departure at the palace, "Balaram, a king-maker raises his head when the Political Agent is not staying in the residency. The Agent has the strength of one brigade." "General, wish you a happy journey to Mao during the escort of the Political Agent but please live in a war-psychosis," General Balaram said in a derisive manner as he puffed the sweet-scented tobacco pipe.

James left the residency one fine morning towards Kohima with his wife, Emma, his sons, Dick and Edward and sister. He would sail for England from Bombay and enjoy the last days of summer in England. He left Manipur only one week or so after Kotwal Tekendrajit was exiled to the island of Thanga.

The ladies of the Sanakeithel went on gossiping that His Highness was indisposed after the trial of his fourth son and he shut himself inside his bed-room and he refused to see his visitors. Lamphel, the Shellungba attended the chamber of Sir Chandrakirti and knelt before him who said, "Lamphel, what you desire to say anything to me? I am very sad to find that my Kotwal is no longer seen in the palace. Had he been here I could see him riding his chestnut horse. Lamphel, do you think that a

king has no sorrows. No never he is the most pitiable man! I love my son, Koireng, I how I tried to make him a good prince, the incident on the top of the Govinda temple, the wax-model plot scandal and now the exile," he said with tears on his face. He dabbed the tears by the ends of his silk chaddar. Wish I spend my days at Sridham Brindabana for the rest of my life. But could I leave my palace leaving my old mother, the Raj Mata, all my sons and daughters. But can I say that Koireng is not one of my dear sons! Think Lamphel when you grow old you will understand!"

'Srijut, Koireng is my master and friend being of almost my age. Srijut, let him be recalled from the exile during the absence of the Agent sahib?" Lamphel said falling prostrate before the king.

Sir Chandrakriti said nothing but his tears spoke of his intense love for his fourth son.

"Srijut, let me visit the place of his exile and have a handsome meal with him there," Lamphel said as he rose from the posture, and he left towards the big carved door.

"Lamphel shellungba, call my Koireng and tell him I want to see him," Sir Chandrakirti shouted to him with sobs.

Kotwal Tekendrajit left Thanga many times and visited his mother during the night. He knew that the absence of General Thangal and the Political Agent would trigger off a sea of rebellions against his father. One pitch dark night he visited his mother on the bank of the Imphal river. His mother, the Chongtha lady looked at his son with fond affection saying, "Son, my only son, you take your favourite fish. Well, I cook."

It was late when Kotwal Tekendrajit left his mother's home on the bank of the Imphal river; a full moon night punctuated by a slight drizzle cast a magic charm on the nightscape. He trotted along the bank of the river towards the palace. He wanted to shun the faces of the people who popped out their faces to see him. He remembered well that his mother shivered in the summer heat by the gaze of the popped out eyes. He rode past the ferry on the boat over the Imphal river; a lone man with a dirty cloth over his head sat at the ferry-site, who looked up at the prince and bowed on the wet sandy ground. The prince threw a shining silver coin on the ground in front of the ferry-man who pressed the coin on his forehead. The Kotwal trotted and trotted around the bend near the grove of the Mahabali temple.

"Hei ho," the Kotwal shouted at a passing group of riders in the shadow of the rows of peepul trees. A sudden encounter with the strange horse riders at such a place and time cast a shadow of doubts; the prince knew almost all the princes like the palms of his hands. He knew where Prince Pakkasana could be found out at such an hour. So too, Prince Kullachandra at this hour chanting rosaries on a rug before his God in his residence. And Prince Jillangamba too! He was the most unpredictable because he was the youngest and still unmarried.

Dauntless as he was, Kotwal galloped towards the strange horse-riders under the shadow of the peepul trees. "Pakka, what are you doing there?" he shouted at the top of his voice, But no reply. "Jilla, Jilla, what are you doing there," he shouted again.

He slowed down his chestnut horse and chased the strange riders along the bank of the Imphal river but the riders cantered on the dusty road quite relentlessly. The prince galloped towards them with his hand on the hilt of his sword. As he neared the strange riders, he raised his sword in the air in the moon-light and shouted, "Who, in the name of God, are you?" He moved his horse quite menacing but no reply came from the unknown riders and he took over the last rider and he was about to heck the rider with his sword but he suddenly dropped his sword. "Why so cross, it is just a ride in the moon-lit night, I bow to you, oh, great prince, son of Sir Chandrakirti, the Maharajah of Manipur," a veiled lady said as she rode her horse.

The Kotwal wiped his eyes with his handkerchief in absolute ignorance and he closed his eyes on finding a lady rider with a bewitching beauty. "Where are you riding and with whom are you riding," the prince said but she said nothing. She followed the group of riders and vanished behind a row of bamboo thickets. A slight drizzle followed and then it became heavier. The prince stopped under a big peepul tree for a while but the strange riders were gone. The prince galloped towards his sanggai quite dumb founded. On reaching his sanggai, his Shija was astounded to see him standing on the verandah. More puzzled was the tailed star that blazed across the firmament!

Threats from the king-makers were no longer a figment of imagination; Gangaram's escape to the unknown hills caused consternation among the people. The lallups came to know that his clan did not send any youths and able-bodied men for the

lallups. Ushaba shouted to the lallups from his locality, "Where are the lallups from your leikai?"

The lallup was reticent and avoided his words.

At the dead of the night, the musket-slung sentry at the southern gate was awoken by an unknown voice under the oil-lamp. An middle aged man, turbaned and covered with a thick chaddar on his nose slogged near the gate and he stood imploring to the sentry. He had walked on foot from the rebel-head quarter at Chandrakhong in the night shunning people on the way; his work was the most arduous and his service could save a kingdom. This took the uppermost in his mind. He opened his mouth imploring help; his words failed him. His angular and hairy face under the cloak was half-lighted by the flickering light. His looks showed his determination as well as seriousness in his eyes.

The black dhoti-clad sentry rose from the stone-slab quite drowsily and shouted at the strange man, "Hei, you what are you doing here, kick your arse, speak up or I shoot you, you old heck. Why you disturb me at this hour of the night?"

"Sentry, I have an urgent piece of work at the palace?" the strange man shouted from the ground to the sentry on the wall.

"Whom do you want to see?"

"Any, the Senapati or any important man in the palace," shouted the man from below.

"Who are you? Tell me frankly or I shoot you down!" the sentry shouted to the man and he cocked his rifle and put it on the wall and he leaned over the wall.

"Sentry, I am a cook?"

"Whose cook? Tell me frankly."

"To be frank, I was to be a cook of the king but I fell out with him and I am here" the man said in his low voice.

"Do you mean there is another king or king-maker in this land?" the sentry said quite surprised.

"Well, then you go straight to the Senapati and apprised him of all you hear and see but mind that you don't exaggerate lest you are exposed on the nearest execution-ground at the break of the dawn," the sentry said looking to the cook. He shouted to the sentries inside the palace, "Hei ho, a man is coming inside the

palace. "Send him to the Senapati!"

The sentry walked to the other sentry who was shoring with a whizzing sound; he patted on his shoulders saying, "You puppy, sleep well for tomorrow, you have to pack lunch, dried rice, dried fishes, salt and chillies and smacking kiss from your bride!"

The sleeping sentry did not wake from his slumber because his companion made jokes to him all the time at the time of change-over of night-shifts. He snored off while the other sentry walked to and fro on the wall and he adjusted the cannon through the embrasure on the wall towards the southern gate. He saw the moving light near the cobbled path and heard the hooves of horses under the silver-oak lined trees.

The dawn broke with the shearing sound of cannon; five times of alarm signals. The morning birds flew helter and skelter while the cannon sounded thunderously reverberating on the wall. He saw General Thangal racing on his palanquin with Thangjaba Chaoba and Mongjamba carrying his war-kits through the western gate. "Sure, the pointed nose fellow under a white cloak was the informer breaking news to the Senapati of the impending rebellion, and who could king-maker be?" the sentry said to himself with an admonishing look. A group of sentries came to relieve them. "What the hell, do you learn anything about the battle and the alarm sound of the cannon?" he shouted to the kuts from the wall.

"The man who shouted, "Hate kite dress, grab no land! No more anglicisation!" one kut shouted to the sentry above the wall.

"Who is that man?"

"Gangaram!"

"Where?"

"Chandrakhong, Andro and fortified at Kamu, an over-spreading empire!"

"Where is the Kotwal?"

"I fear he sensed that before and he is now sitting in the Top Garod and he broke from the exile!"

"Who cares when the marble-faced, barrel-chested James is not here;"

The alarm signal of the cannon brought thousands of kuts and lallups streaming through all the gates of the palace each carrying his handiest weapons. A bloody battle was in sight. What the tailed star portended was right, all cried with lurid glances on their faces. Chaobhal galloped towards his home through the western gate. The stragglers near the Sanakeithel fled to their homes. Basak, the Bengali shop-keeper shouted "Babu, what is all this, five cannon shots, the mustering of kuts on the royal polo-ground?"

"Babu Basak, a pretender's battle," Chaobhal shouted to the shop-keeper as he rode on the road towards the Nambul river. "Just going home to collect my kits for the battle!"

"Babu, where is Kotwalji?"

"Babu, don't wag your tongue," Chobhal shouted, "the Kotwal is on a parole. Shut your mouth." And he rode past Basak who looked at him from behind.

General Balaram led the royal army to storm the rebel palace at Chandrakhong; Col. Shamu went to assist the old general along with a huge number of kuts and lallups. The palace was left to General Thangal for its defence. All the princes rushed to defend the three gates of palace. The old general was marshalling the troops riding his bay horse on the royal polo-ground. The Kotwal and Prince Surchandra galloped from the southern gate to the northern gate under the silver-oak trees without speaking a word. So tense was the moment in the palace that all the cannon were drawn out of the top-khanna to meet any eventuality.

"Kotwal, the cook said the rebels are going to storm the palace in any moment, and so be careful," Prince Surcahndra said, his words almost choked him.

"Yambung, I think they won't take any chance! We are well prepared, and once we get the information no human being could storm our palace," Kotwal Tekendrajit said as he rode his chestnut horse.

They rode towards the Chirai gate past the rows of kuts lining the road between the gate and the southern gate. The kuts talked to each other that the rebels would capture the palace in any moment and all waited quite anxiously. The lallups streamed in inside the palace. One sardar was seen entering under the western gate shouting "The rebels are all captured and within one hour

or so they will be sent here bound in chains!" He rode past the gate raising his hands.

'Hei-ho, sardar, just wait and tell us something more," one kut shouted to the sardar waving his hands.

A tense moment in the Top Garod. All the ministers and the princes rushed to the Garod; Giridhari, the Angom Ningthou, all the Dewans and all generals attended the darbar. Dinachandra and Borachaoba also came running to the Garod. Old Thangal was quite active and he seemed to have been free from the gout. He was up and doing in the darbar. All the kuts and lallups almost eavesdropped the session in the darbar. The danger from the rebellion was, for the time, over as they learnt that all the rebels were captured by the overwhelming forces of General Balaram and Col. Shamu who had already sent the captives in chained boxes drawn by horses. A big crowd had already been waiting outside the palace walls eagerly waiting the prisoners-of-war who were on their way to the palace.

"Where is the king-maker?" one kut asked to another standing nearby.

"Hush, you chap," Ushaba said with a protuding mouth and he stood on the doorway to check any unwarranted entry into the Top Garod.

"What is General Thangal doing inside the Top Garod?" another kut asked in whispers.

"It is the darbar business," Ushaba replied sternly.

"Why darbar business when there is battle at Chandrakhong?" kut said anxiously.

"My God, all the rebels are being sent to the palace and the ministers and generals are going to decide their fate," Ushaba said in nervousness.

One sardar came riding past the southern gate and shouted to all standing on the roadside, "Oh, sons of the soil, make way for the prisoners-of-war! They are coming under heavy royal guards, oh, sons of the soil, make way for the prisoners-of-war!"

The kuts dragged two maibis in tattered clothes and one cook through the southern gate. They were followed by Chingakhamba pundit, Toibijamba, Dayananda, Khoudon bound in chains. Their faces wore a weary look and their garments soaked with blood.

Thambal walked among them. He could not walk by himself. One kut supported him with his arm on his shoulder. Angangmacha, the cook was also led by the kuts. Within one hour, the prisoners-of-war had arrived in the palace under heavy royal escorts.

"Ushaba, just quite astounding to see all these prisoners and I hope I will never see such spectacle!" Laishraba Kut said standing near Ushaba.

"Indeed! Just horrible!" Ushaba said with his chin trembling.

"What will be their fate?"

"Did anybody escape from the hands of General Thangal and just keep silent. You see all the ministers and the princes are breaking their nerves on how the prisoners should be treated," Ushaba said in whispered tones, "but Laishraba, don't leave this Garod without my words because the Kotwal is very busy to-day and you see what is happening to-day? About two hundred or three hundred were being sent from the battle-field."

Tonu Subedar emerged from the Top Garod and elbowed through the small crowd near the stairs. Ushaba looked at him and said, "Subedar sahib, what is the decision of the darbar?"

"The darbar is in a tense moment!" he replied crossing his fingers in dismay.

"What is that? What will be their fate?" Ushaba asked in anxiety.

"The decision will do no good!" the subedar replied, his chin almost trembling in fear.

"Why, subedar?"

"Because General Thangal does not like to see any more pretenders' battle in his old age!" Ushaba said with a sullen look on his face.

"Subedar, what about Srijut's opinion on manner of treatment to the rebel-chief and his followers?" Ushaba asked quite anxiously.

"Of course, death and exile is in the hands of Srijut but Srijut won't like to interfere in this nasty business and he may leave everything to the old general whom you know is quite blood-thirsty by nature. The general means business," the subedar said in a sedate and sombre tone, "the old general will do whatever he thinks right and execution of the prisoners of the first degree

means that he solves the problem for ever. But I am no sure let us wait the final decision of the darbar!"

Giridhari left the Top Garod with his eyes white and downcast; he slipped from the crowd quickly and so too Major Jambhuban and the rest of the ministers. Dinachandra and Borachaoba seemed too much weighed down by the deliberations in the darbar. But the decision of the darbar was kept secret, The sardars and poilas rode towards the western gate.

Kotwal Tekendrajit and General Thangal emerged from the Top Garod and they looked at the prisoners of war sitting on the ground in chains; the prisoners avoided their looks. One sardar held one scroll and read out, in a shrill voice from the stairs of the Top Garod, "Phougakchao Taba should be executed and exposed at Wangthonbi, Chingakham Pundit at Arongthong, Khoudon at Chingmeirong, Doyananda at Shangaibrou, Toibijamba at Lilong, Pangoi at Iroishemba, Thambal at Wangkheipungjao, Sorokhaiba at Chandrakhong, Irengba Thundangba and his son at Ningel, Nongthonba Hanjaba at Shikhong, Senapati of the rebel and Nushukphaba and one Leiyu-sungba at Andro and the rest will be freed after whipping thirty lashes in front of the Top Garod."

"Oh, honoured courtier of Srijut, have the rebel-chief, Gangaram known as Irengba Thundangba and his son been captured?" one elderly man shouted from the crowd.

"He, too shall be executed with his brother and son at Ningel," the sardar replied in a peremptory voice.

All the prisoners of war were led away by the kuts riding horses; there was a whisper among the crowd that some more rebels were among the closest retinues of the Maharajah and some were still residing in the palace. It sent a chill among the crowd. The elders were tight-lipped and they shunned any free talks with the strangers.

"Who is that horse-man riding towards the palace and look! Any message from the battle-field?" one middle-aged man said looking at the lone rider. All waited quite anxiously. "Have the rebels escaped from the custody of General Balaram?" one sardar said as he looked tip-toed towards the palace. Partha, the drill-master came riding through the crowd towards the Top Garod. He dismounted from his horse and said, "Where are the

prisoners?"

"All sent to the execution-ground!" came the reply.

"My God! There will be a row between Thangal and Balaram! The latter sent a sardar to Srijut not to execute all the rebels," he said in a grunt.

"Why, why!" all shouted.

"I'm a petty officer in the royal service, and how could I say on such matter," Partha said in a lingering voice, "but General Balaram is waiting Srijut's hukum to confirm that execution of the rebel-chief, his son and his brother. And he will race to the palace in case he does not get the same."

Almost all the prisoners were executed on the execution-grounds. No matter what Balaram pleaded leniency during the absence of the Political Agent, he stomped into the chamber of Sir Chandrakirti and fell on his feet crying "Srijut, my friend, General Thangal will do everything to discredit me, a general who served in the palace for forty years. Srijut, the burden is too heavy to bear on my shoulders and is there any man who could bear it?" He almost sobbed at his feet like a child.

"General, what is that?" Chandrakirti said patting on his shoulders.

"Srijut, if the battle gives any blame I could bear it but please think of the extinction of the whole dynasty and we should not forget that there lives a man who is greater than Srijut!"

"Ipu, I realise it, all are my faults. I leave everything to Ipu Thangal," Sir Chandrakirti said.

"Srijut, please leave some room for the clearance from the Viceroy and the Political Agent too for committing such massacre," Balaram said almost in sobs, "it is a sheer genocide!"

"Have all the inmates of the family been executed?" he asked in surprise.

"Gangaram, his brother and son perished on the execution-ground at Ningel, and his youngest son escaped in the garb of a baby putting on tongaphanek under the arms of his mother, just horrible this battle!" Balaram said with sobs. "one lady escaped one spear hurled in the pitch dark night while she was embracing the dead body on the stake! Unfortunately he was her husband."

A sordid tale, Srijut, never I dream another war and all this happened only because Kangaba wishes so and not Srijut who loves peace and prosperity in the land. Now Srijut, let me take leave, I am ill, ill at my job, ill at everything."

The old general fell prostrate before Sir Chandrakirti and he sobbed with spasmodic tremour in his body; he rose and wiped the tears from his eyes with kerchief. He left the chamber.

After the execution of Gangaram, Jogindra claimed the gaddi by raising some mercenaries but he was shot dead in the jungles before he could land Manipur. Sir Chandrakirti had gone through the traumas of rebellions and a falling health. He wrote a letter to the Viceroy apprising him of the latest law and order in the land during the Political Agent's stay in England. One fine morning, a rider, haggard and weary-eyed rode past the western gate telling Ushaba, the lallup chingba that James Johnstone, the Political Agent had already arrived at Bishenpur. Yubarajah Surchandra led a large number of retainers to Phoijing and received the Agent. James was an old faithful friend to the Maharajah, he said himself. And he called upon him on the next day who was almost in a falling health. He hinted that Thangal in spite of his holding the post of Ayapurelship, General Sawaijamba Balaram's services should be made available to him during his settling of the boundary with Burma and with a grin, he shook hands with him and left.

One morning James sensed that Thangal would drop in at his residence and made a hue and cry for relieving him from the Ayapurelship. But he came on the pretext that Sir Chandrakirti was almost critically ill and that in case of any eventuality, the Political Agent should resist any scramble for the gaddi.

As he sat hunched on the table in front of James, two cannon sounds sheared in the stillness of morning. The old man almost jumped from his chair shouting, "Agent Sahib, what I had feared has now come and so good-bye." He walked out of the office leaving the Agent on the lurch.

"What happened in the palace, old friend?" James asked in surprise. Turning his face, he said "Agent sahib, if the cannon sounds the death of Sir Chandrakirti, just imagine the clamour for the gaddi!" and he almost jumped into his palanquin saying "Hurry up!" On reaching the gate he shouted to Meechao Lallup, "What are the cannon-shots?" The lallup replied with his mouth

agape "Ipu, I am looking you, the Kotwal's first shija is no more!"

"God bless her, Meechao Lallup, you go to the residency and tell Kundu or Chunder Singh, the private secretary that Srijut's health is quite fine and the sound of the cannon is for a domestic event," Thangal said to the lallup.

After a few days, James called on the ailing Maharajah and introduced the members of the boundary Commission in the royal reception chamber. He introduced Mr. Phayre, Dr Watt, Mr. Oldham, Col. Badgley, Mr. Ogle and Lt. Dun.

"Well, His Highness, for a smooth and speedy work in the survey, may I ask you to replace Major Thangal by Mr. Balaram for the Ayapurelship," James said holding his head high in his usual nasal tone.

"Agent sahib, what you think good please inform me well in advance, and" Sir Chandrakirti replied with a wry smile. After this, the party broke off.

"James is a fool who always loves to teach while he never cares to learn!" echoed Sir Chandrakirti as soon as they left the hall.

James joined Mr. Phayre at Kongal station at the border Burma and Manipur. The craggy hills all around were whitened by snow. He saw Emma racing with a bunch of flowers crying, "James, tulips, tulips for the Christmas!" He took the flowers from her and looked at the flowers saying "Not exactly tulips!" Emma looked at the flowers and then at her husband with her head covered by a red scarf and her face as red as a ripe apple.

"What about the Christmas cake, Emma?" James said looking at her.

"James, it will be a big surprise, I brought all these from the residency," Emma said with a smile.

"To-day's Christmas is a big one because seven Europeans will sit together and celebrate the Christmas!" James said.

"Phayre, what about the Pagan Woon?" James said looking at him.

"Mr. James, not yet turn up!" came the reply, "the Kongal is just a hot-bed!"

James found one morning that Emma was all in shivers. It was

the Oriental kalazar! He sailed for England and he again arrived at the residency after the leave and again sailed for England but Emma did not recover from the tropical disease. James came again but this time found General Thangal out of his control and he saw that the Kongal case became an insoluble one. Old Thangal said, "No need to investigate the murder case at Kongal no justice at the time of survey!" He put up a jaunty air. James wrote a letter to Sir Chandrakirti to remove the old general from the Ayapurelship but he knew well that it was easier to remove the Maharajah rather than the general.

James left the residency on March 19, for the last time. Old Thangal shook hands with his old foe and they smiled looking at each other. He sent the stocky Agent as far as Mao station and saw him marching on the narrow hill-road beyond the border as he sat on a chair. He sensed that the long span of eighty years stretched like a long hand, each joint marked with his achievements, the pretenders' battles, the humiliation at James' instigation, his dismissal from the Ayapurelship and finally the end of the James' days in the residency! Like a graffito, it was smudgy and eternal!

CHAPTER III

The stifling and hot days of May, 1886 saw Sir Chandrakirti on his death bed; the inmates of the palace said that the crows predicted the omnimous and unseen things that hovered at the time of the untimely death of kings. Kumudini, the Raj Mata said in whispered tones to all her grandsons that the time had arrived at last to have the last glimpse of their father. The Raj Mata spoke in puzzles; it was shrouded in mystery; her hints were puzzles. The inmates of the palace said she lived in puzzles.

"No sound of lamentation!" she cried out in anguish with her thin fingers pointing in the void air in the sandal reeked chamber of the dying king.

"Lest the pretenders would scramble for the gaddi, throne," she said again with her hands wiping tears from her shrunken eyes.

General Balaram stood like a scarecrow by her side and listened to her words nodding his turbaned head and his lips muttered, "It is perfectly right, Raj Mata."

"General, see where are Borachaoba and Dinachandra, the Wangkheirakpa? Of course, Dinachandra is sitting inside the chamber but the other is missing; I have my intelligence also," she said to the old general's ears in whispers.

"Raj Mata, I send my words to all sardars to carry out the orders of the Raj Mata to the last letters!" the general said pouting his lips.

Both entered the chamber and saw her son almost dying; the chamber wore an empty look; it looked wierd without any brilliance and decor.

Tekendrajit came running with his sandals spattering on the pavement; his jaws trembled like one shivering in the cold winter and his heart almost jumped out of his mouth; he felt an icy coldness at the whispered tones of those gathering in the chamber of the dying king. His lips chanted trillion names of Gods that he remembered at the moment. He said to himself, "Lord Govinda, all the swarms of the butter-flies, swarms of sparrows sighted on the tops of the Tomjing hills dying on the open heaths and the bright meteors and the shining trails of the night visitors are the

ominous signs that portend the passing of a great king."

Cold sweat settled on his forehead and he unconsciously touched his forehead and he stuttered before he spoke. He fell prostrate before the dying king. Looking up he saw the Raj Mata with her hollow and shrunken eyes. Beside her sat his eldest step brother, Kullachandra and young Jillangamba.

"Koireng, have a darshan of your father, perhaps, it is the last day," the Raj Mata said in a broken voice.

Col. Shamu, the Luwang Ningthou said touching his shoulders, "Koireng, Srijut did ask you. But don't worry and leave everything to me. The illness is quite critical."

"Uncle," replied Tekendrajit in a subdued shaky voice.

"Srijut's birthday is on Tuesday but the day passed off without a hitch. But everything is in the will of Lord Govinda!" Col. Shamu said.

Tekendrajit hung his face being torn into many pieces; it seemed any unseen things pulled every nerves and fibres of his body but he calmed his mind and he inhaled the air inside the chamber reeking with incense, agar and sandals; he encountered the murky faces of his step-brothers. He looked at the face of his dying father, soft, calm, innocent but feeble and ineffectual. He saw his life throbbing with a slow ebb; he opened his eyes and looked towards him; his eyes spoke something, hinted some message, his throat moved spasmodically.

Tekendrajit drew near the dying king and waited his message with his lip quivering. He said to himself, "Is my love for my father less than that of step-brothers who with their mothers had won so much affections from my father; of course, of course, my love is no less than that of other brothers. Prince Pakka is young, so too Jillangamba. Time is a great unifier or a great disintegrator! Time heals all or time disintegrates all." He looked at his father who, with his shrunken eyes opened his eyes again. Balaram looked at the scene without words, and said to the prince, "Koireng, your father wants to say something to you!"

With beckoning eyes, Sir Chandrakirti lifted his thick eyebrows; the Raj Mata watched her son looking at his sons; to her it was the sand slipping from the sand-clock. She cried "Hari bala, Hari bala!" She made swirls of chalis in an ecstatic mood.

"Come here, Koireng, I say one thing to you about the past wrongs of your mother, the wax model plot! I made an amende honourable to I forgive your mother! To all your brothers, ruin will stare the scion who raises a finger against your own brothers ." Words slowly receded from his lips and the Raj Mata quickened her chanting and swirls of chalis; her voice shouted to the pitch on seeing the scene; she turned her eyes to Balaram and said, "Where is General Kangaba? Tell him that no sound of lamentation should be heard in the palace and all the gates of the palace be closed and no visitors be allowed to enter the great gates of the palace while my dear son, Chandrakirti is being cremated. No pretenders' battle should disturb the installation of his eldest son on the gaddi."

The royal physicians felt the cold pulse and they rolled the white draperies over his face. The sardars and kuts rushed towards the gates and made tight security rings there. All the princes touched the dead king's feet and fell prostrate before the dead king. Dinachandra also rose from his seat and fell prostrate. Raising from the ground he led all the younger princes to hasten the installation of Surchandra on the gaddi and he said, "Surchandra, you should sit on the throne before the cremation of Srijut."

Ladies in ureirom, coloured phaneks streamed into the chamber and paid respect to the dead king. Col. Shamu and Balaram led the princes to the coronation hall; the Wangkheirakpa walked behind with cheerful eyes saying; "Nothing would happen at all and everything will go on smoothly." None uttered anything as they hastened towards the coronation hall. Behind them walked heavily the royal guards with long and bent swords and spears and rifles. Sawaijamba watched the whole scene with cynic eyes and he went towards Tekendrajit as they proceeded towards the hall and said, "Where is Borachaoba, the Yaiskul Lakpa not seen at this hour! Almost the dear and near ones have been informed of the death of Sir Chandrakirti but he shied off his presence at this moment. What happened to him, only Lord Govinda knows!"

Tekendrajit did not utter anything and he nodded his head quite silently; he looked around and saw Chaobhal standing at the far end of sangai phamang with his sword. He looked around and saw the sardars and kuts in combat readiness as usual in the hour of death of a king. After the brief ceremony of sitting on the

gaddi, all emerged out of the palace enclosure; out-side the enclosure, the kuts stood with their arms. Thangal rode on a palanquin and shouted orders to the sardars and kuts standing on either side of the cobble-path.

Premamayee showed anxiety in her mincing gaits; she walked in faded silk chaddar and she dabbed the moist in her eyes. Behind her scuttled Prince Lukhoisana, a young chap who looked at the whole scene with his mouth agape. The prince looked behind and saw Pitamber, son of the eldest sister of the dead king. His stout face showed impulsiveness and extreme sorrows at the death of the king. His whitish face was skin deep showing his alacrity and indeciveness like all young men at his age. But he developed his high handedness to suit the environment in the palace, fencing, duelling and hunting of tigers in the far-off jungles.

The young prince said in subdued voice, "Pitamber, Srijut's body cannot be cremated until my dad Surchandra sits on the throne and now it will be over when my dad begs blessings from the Great Pakhangba at his mythical cave."

"Yes, Lukhoi, let us proceed towards the cave and see what the old Thangal is quite busy with his sardars and kuts, his daily life is kuts and kuts and sardars and sardars!" Pitamber said to the young prince.

The ceremony at the cave was brief; all left the place towards the Paonam Hiden for cremation; the newly made king went towards the Top Garod; behind him walked all the princes in quick steps; the generals and sardars followed the king in their battle-dresses.

All sat quiet in the Top Garod; Dinachandra sat like a statue with drops of sweat on his forehead. He looked around and found himself stifling inside the hall. The new Maharajah sat with his eyes almost closed. He looked at Tekendrajit and raised his eyes but he became reticent again.

"General Kangaba, what is the game this time?" Balaram said with a wry smile on his face.

"The Yaiskullakapa, not yet traced," he replied.

"In the cave," he said again nodding his head.

"Picnicking somewhere with his mercenaries," Thangal replied

with a grin.

"Even at this hour, the death of Sir Chandrakirti!" he said.

"Reported sighting on the banks of the Nambol river with fifteen princes," Thangal said with his teeth grinding.

"Col. Shamu and we, generals will do the job but the cremation cannot and shall not wait," Balaram said looking around.

The five cannon-shots sounded the alarm; the swallows and a multitude of birds flew off the branches at the unusual sound.

At the alarm sound of cannon, the lallups rushed towards the palace arming themselves with muskets, sword and spears; glint of the weapons shone like the white ngahou fish in the summer floods. The Lallup Chingba, leaders of the lallups directed them for defence of the palace and the land; they made strong defences behind the great gates of the palace. They waited the storming of the palace by the pretender. Col. Shamu and the General incharge of the Tuliyaïma rushed to the battle-field at Nambol.

Tekendrajit and Thangal came riding to the Chirai gate; the latter shouted "Sardars, what is the position, have all the kuts and lallups reported for duty here."

"Ipu, all reported according to instructions," one sardar replied bowing his head.

The two left in haste towards the Koutumba gate; all looked at the galloping horses.

"Who is the commander-in-chief of the rebel prince," one kut said to another standing nearby.

"Paona Brajabashi," replied the other.

"And who others?"

"Fifteen other princes."

"Will there be no pretenders amongst them after they sit on the gaddi?" asked the kut.

"Hey, you who took two mirukful of rice, it is none of your business!" cried the other kut.

"It is not fun to raise an army while the cremation of another dead king is not over?" he said.

"Fools talk too much," the kuts said with anger.

Silence reigned the place.

The kuts waited at the gate till the night came; news came in floods from the battle-field as the couriers shuttled between the palace and the field of action. They learnt that Col. Shamu was bogged down in the marshy land of Nambol and retired to a nearby village.

"Where is the colonel?" the kut asked.

"Cooking utong-chak at the Heibi-Makhong," one lallup chingba replied.

"Who is the Commander-in-Chief?" the kut asked.

"Paona;"

"Just funny, the royal army retreating, how strong is Borachaoba?" the kut said in wonder.

"Son of Raja Labanya, he knows the art of battles, the secret of storming the Chirai gate," the lallup chingba replied.

"How is that colonel that we called the major for Tuliyaïma," the kut said with eagerness.

"Colonel Shamu is the Raj Mata's own brother and one day he came to General Balaram with one kwagok full of silver coins. He said, 'General, I now want to be a major and I offer this money to you to request Srijut on my behalf.' 'No, Shamu, you take this money to General Thangal and press him by giving this money,' he said. The old man was a wit and he knew that he took the money from the Raj Mata. He went to General Thangal and said the same thing to him. But the two generals approached the Maharajah and said that Shamu also wanted to be a major. Srijut was joking at this idea. He said, 'Uncle, you have also desired to become a major but you have not yet catch even a butterfly.'" the lallup chingba said to the kut sitting near him.

"What happened then?"

"He is the uncle of the dead king and so he became a major and then he is the major for the Tuliyaïma division," came the reply.

The waning moon cast its lurid light on the palace; the security tightened in and around the palace. A rumour that the rebels might storm the palace at any time had gripped the inmates of the palace in total panick. "Where is the Kotwal? Where is General Thangal? What are they doing?" The kuts said to each other. Surchandra held darbar in the Top Garod in the night. He

wanted to take the help from the Political Agent. But Tekendrajit said, "Srijut, I discount the sarkar's help. If our nine brothers could unite we could drive the British from this land." Of course, it was the lean year. The British help was not forthcoming as the they were engaged in clashes in the jungles of Burma. The sarkar's help would mean march of sepoys from the nearest stations, Silchar or Kohima.

Surchandra rose from the raised chair and paced quite restlessly in the hall; his face quivered at the idea that the rebels might storm the palace at any time. Old Thangal watched him quite helplessly, and he came near Kotwal Tekendrajit and said in a low tone, "Sanaton, Srijut is quite upset and he is quite good and he is over-timorous and why he should be, the Kotwal is here and so too I am, although past eighty I could place my services for him". The old man said "of course we din't get the sarkar's help, does it mean that a rebel like Borachaoba could storm the palace, no never!"

"Ipu, the whole thing is distasteful, Borachaoba who attends the palace everybody should vanish on the day of the death of Sir Chandrakirti."

"But Sanaton. it is time to see our guts," Thangal said, his face showing determination and his old fire in his face.

"Of course, Ipu, it is all that we wanted, all we wish to die for our mother-land!" Tekendrajit said showing his broken front tooth in the most unguarded moment. He cast his face down in his usual humility.

"Sanaton. pray for heaven's shake, please don't disturb Srijut's performance of anhics before Lord Govinda and let us be doing our duties, not taxing his mind for defence of the motherland!" Thangal said pointing his fingers in the void air.

Riding his chestnut horse, Tekendrajit and the old general rushed to the battle-field and relieved Col. Shamu at the battle-field of Nambol. And Borachaoba escaped through the by-pass of the Tongjei-maril. Everybody was relieved at the news that the battle was over. "But there is still battle!" the old general said repeatedly," because the rebel will launch another attack very soon. Paona Brajabashi, his commander-in-chief will never allow himself defeated unhonourably!"

The sound of the alarm signal of cannon was no longer heard; everybody in the palace was waiting a date for coronation of Prince Surchandra. His Rani, Premamayee walked on the courtyard putting on red velvet sandals; her reddish face matched the pinkish colour and the golden colour. She put on emeralds, gourmet stones in her bangles. The smell of screw pine was preferred to eau de Cologne! she bragged on as she walked from the chamber to chamber in the zenana mahal. Her maids stuffed her silk garments in the lotus-shape painted phiruks. The madhumati creepers made an arbour near the chamber of the zenana. Huming a music she picked the most beautiful bunch "Oh, madhumati flowers, Thou hadst blossomed far from the gaze of the flower-pickers but how long Thou wouldst hide from the gaze of the maids?" She picked one bunch and placed it gently on her tresses.

The temple bell pealed and pealed, its sound ringing in the evening air. Prince Surchandra went inside his chamber; his time was mainly pre-occupied in the royal office since his ascension to the gaddi. She said waving a bunch of madhumati near his nose, "Sanakhwa, now you can sleep peacefully and forget all the battles that haunt your beautiful dreams."

"Of course, it is quite right, Premamayee, I am just feeling tired after all the traumatic events," he said.

"But, Sanakhwa, what about your step-brothers?", she said jokingly.

"Premamayee, Sir Chandrakirti's curse is more than a castle, a fort! He who raises a sword against his own brother shall perish his clan! Is it not what Sir Chandrakirti said at his dying moment?" he said with a lingering smile. He undressed himself and put his head on the pillow.

"But Sanakhwa," she said as she sat on his bed, "may I ask one simple question?"

"What is that? That old puzzle when we met in your old home?" he said as he held her hands.

"Oh no, quite new one," she said as she smiled looking at him, "a simple question, a perfectly new one."

"Tell me, Premamayee," he said.

"Sanakhwa, which of the two you prefer, a pillow for a yubarajah

and another for a Maharajah? And which of the two would bring more beautiful dreams?"

Both laughed.

"Premamayee, how intelligent you are," he said laughingly. "never I could imagine that you had had so much wit?"

Oil lights flickered in the night wind howling outside the gold-laced windows. The summer rains drummed and drummed on the tin roofs of the chamber amidst of the peals of thunder sounding like the distress signals of cannon. Premamayee jumped from the bed and listened to the sounds. It was almost like a reverie that he heard the faint voice of Prince Jallakirti calling his brother. She heard for a while and went to the door to open the door.

"What happened, Prince Kullachandra," said Surchandra almost jumping from the bed.

"The ailing prince Jallakirti is about to take the journey just now. Yambung, the one that God loves dies young, so accomplished prince," Kullachandra broke in sobs, "what could we do to the prince who had been smitten with the small pox."

Kotwal Tekendrajit became the senapati after the death of Prince Jallakirti and all the ministers thanked Maharajah Surchandra for his magnanimity and they wished a happy union of all the eight brothers. "But all the princes are too young and they have to go a long way," Giridhari, the Angom Ningthou said to General Balaram. "But Prince Pakka's condition is also serious, he was also smitten with the deadly disease. The Sagol hanjaba has a sour spleen," Giridhari said.

After a few days, the cannon sounded; a domestic affair signal; the old Raj Mata was dead. Her son's death and also of Prince Jallakirti had undermined her health like the big trunk of a tree uprooted by the cyclone. One evening Prince Pakkasana visited Maharajah Surchandra in his chamber and he sat in the chamber without a word. Young Prince Lukhoisana also sat by his side resting his body on the prince.

"Pakka, how we experience since our dear father's death and it seems there is none who could give any advice or any consoling words to us," Surchandra said looking at Pakka who tried to avoid his look. He wanted to say some words but words failed him. Only his lips quivered.

"Pakka, do you mind that your elder brother, the Kotwal was made the Senapati in the darbar by me," Surchandra said drawing his face closer.

Pakka rose from his chair with a jerk and walked to and fro in the chamber. Surchandra looked at the prince quite surprised.

Premamayee entered the chamber and saw Pakka, "Pakka, what happened?" she said standing near the threshold.

Pakka said nothing but he stood turning his face from her and said, "Nothing, dear sister-in-law!" She knew that the prince gulped down some words and concealed his grievances. Of course, Pakka had a sour spleen since his illness, she thought.

"But Yambung, I don't mind that I was not made the senapati but the distribution of forces should be taken into consideration." the prince said looking at them.

"Oh, Pakka, we discuss the matter during the whole night. We could see and alter at our will," Premamayee said consoling the prince.

"But Yambung, let us hope for the best. I make one request to you. I have decided to go Brindabana and consign my father's asti along with my granny's also. I want to leave this land for a change of weather," Pakka said.

"Pakka, when do you like to leave for Sridham Brindabana? Say frankly. I am now a bit relieved from the pretender's battles," Surchandra said with an affectionate tone, "if you do intend to go to the sacred dham, you may choose the most suitable and opportune time and hour. And I'm quite happy at this."

Pakka seemed to be in a happy mood later and he left the chamber after a sumptuous dinner with shaireng, his choicest fish.

Cauliflower-like cumulus clouds floated in the moonlit night; the moina birds smattered at the passing ladies near the chamber of the Maharajah.

Surchandra sat reclining on a red velvet sofa and the Maharani sat on a cushioned mora near him with her hands lacing an embroider.

"Premamayee, do you remember the day I met you on the day of our first meeting at the place where you sang in the palace,

you looked so enchanting! But time goes so fast," he said as he touched her shoulders gently.

"And you gave me a lotus," she said again.

"You gave me an orchid bunch too" Surchandra said caressing her on her hairs, "a lotus is a heart and I was giving you my heart."

He hugged her, and he smelled the scent of the jasmine flower on her hair. He went to a nearby almirah and took out a casket and took out one green diamond studded necklace from the casket. "It is the diamond necklace, my dear mother kept for you to put on the day of my coronation," he said as he diamond-hugged her.

"A big surprise to me, Sura, you loved me so much," she said as she planted a kiss on his cheek.

The autumn morning was broken by the omnimous distress signals of five-cannon shots. The stragglers scuttled to their houses and all the generals and majors and sardars and kuts rushed towards the fort-palace in the defence of the king. Dinachandra, at the Wangkheirakpa trotted his horse in his war-dress towards the palace. He felt elated that he fought the battle of the Yarou battlefield for the king. He felt proud to remember that his father also served the king as the senapati. The Maharajah must count his service for his father and he himself knows how to storm the Chirai gate, he said to himself. On reaching the palace he saw Senapati Tekendrajit marshalling the sardars in front of the Top Garod. The top-majors rolled out the cannon from the top-khana. Chaobhal, his retinue in his teens, short, blackish and cute in intelligence was racing to an fro among the kuts. He walked with his face thrusting forward like a walking goose.

"Borachaoba has already encamped at Iroishemba and has determined to storm the palace to-day, just approaching with his mercenaries with new arms collected from the native princes outside Manipur, hei ho, all sardars and poilas, defend your king and your mother-land and king!" Thangal shouted to the kuts standing in rows outside the Top Garod. He turned to the Wangkheirakpa and said, "Wangkheirakpa, had not the old Maharajah favoured Borachaoba, he might have not in one of the cells in the jail at Nongpok Ingkhol." The Raj Mata told Sir Chandrakirti, one night in her bed-room, the big peepul tree at

Nitaipat has an over-spreading branches making passers-by walking under it dangerous and it needs a good pruning!" he said further looking his eyes closely.

The Wangkheirakpa listened to the old general's harangue and nodded his head at the hint.

Tekendrajit walked out of the Top Garod in his war-dress; he looked so manly and so fierce. His eyes looking on something void and the unknown working out the mathematics of time and logistics, His red face with red whiskers appeared like a painting wrought by the best master but unlike painting or stone statues he appeared intrepid and charitable! His reticence showed grim determination but he knew before that the rebels could muster a small force and that would be a mid-night adventure!

"That, Nawal Paona Bràjabashi is worth an army, a good fencer. Wit rather than might should be used in his case, a good friend or a fierce enemy," Wangkheirakpa said as he nudged the prince.

"Sanaton, Major Irungba could proceed little against the rebels, because Bràjabashi is a soldier who follows us closely in the arts of logistics and of fencing," Thangal said in a matter-of-fact tone, "but the error he committed is that he backs the wrong horse."

Senapati Tekndrajit said nothing but grinned and he gripped his green hilt sword firmly.

The bugles sounded the march of the royal army; Senapati Tekendrajit and General Thangal led the army to Yongyangtek. Prince Thambousana and the Wangkheirakpa also followed the two veterans on horses. The sporadic sounds of firing shots were heard on approaching the village. The kuts shouted "Maharajah Surchandra ki Jai!" and the kut who held the royal standard with the royal insignia was shot down and another kut rushed to the fallen kut and raised the flag. More fusillades came towards the place where the Senapati was standing on his command-post. But the kuts vanished from the defence line because of the grape-shots. The Senapati saw the rebel forces marching against the royal phalanx and he shouted "Sardars and poilas, time to save Srijut and your mother-land and follow your Commander-in-Chief! Hei ho!" and charged his horse towards the thickest line of the battle. The standard bearer galloped his horse amidst the fusillades. The wounded standard bearer who fell before saw the

rebel soldiers dropping their rifles and vanished like the birds at the sound of the hunters' shots. The wounded standard-bearer supported his wounded body on his arm and chuckled at the sight of the rebel forces fleeing on their heels who cried, "Oh, sons of the soil, the Senapati is speeding towards us, better save our necks!" The Senapati stood on the pedals on his chestnut horse and watched the weakest defence.

"Where is Ipu, Senapati?" the Wangkheirakpa said as he joined him in his position. He sat on his horse as he waited his reply.

"Wangkheirakpa, the old general could mind his own business in the battle-field!" the Senapati said as he watched the battle-field with a binocular. He turned towards him and saw that his words cut him who, with reddened face tried to avoid his look. The Senapati sensed that it was not worth-while to make a remark in such a way.

"Look, the old man is raising his head on his bay horse above the golden sheafs of paddy along the nullah. Bravo, old general, where are the rebels? Where is Sana Borachaoba?" the Senapati shouted to the old general as he trotted towards his position.

"The pretender is quite a character, like all rebels it is the hit and run. Now he is the most elusive. Old that I am I wanted to have a bout of fencing with Borachaoba but he is playing hide and seek. Thangal said as his eyes screwed under his snow white eyebrows. And he rested on his horse by the side of the Senapati.

"Vanquished or vanished, Ipu!" quipped the Senapati.

"Both!" came the reply.

It drew a chuckle from the Wangkheirakpa.

"But, Sanaton, there is still sign of battle, Sanaton, keep your sword as near as you can!" Thangal said.

"General Thangal could smell water in the air, the people say like, this," the Wangkehirakpa said with a wan smile.

"Aha, ha, ha. the Wangkheirakpa, you are coming to the battle!" the old man said looking at him.

The Senapati returned back with the victorious army to the palace. Maharajah Surchandra waited the warriors at the huge western gate on the red carpet rolled out of the palace. Burning incense and lighted wickers on ghee oil filled the evening air.

The brass bell pealed and pealed during the sandha arati. All retired to their homes and all the princes to their sangais. Shijas and the ladies strolled freely on the sanggai-phamang having a tete-a-tete. The evening setting sun wrought the pinkish and orange garb against the September sky. Battle-weary and fatigued, all the kuts had full meals and had slumbers in early hours of the night. Everybody slept save Senapati Tekendrajit and old thangal reading maps and discussing logistics of a second battle in the dimly lit room of the Top Garod. Late it was, the kuts sang folk songs of war and love in the barracks.

"Man all the gates, the Chirai, the western gate and the northern gate, the rebels are on the China bridge on the Nambul and in a minute Sana Borachaoba will storm the palace!" shouted Chaobhal as he galloped through the western gate towards the Top Garod in the darkness.

The Senapati stomped out of the Top Garod with his drawn sword and he shouted "Chaobhal, what is all this, tell me!" Chaobhal jumped from his horse and fall prostrate before him and with frightened eyes he said, "Senapati, the rebels are on the other bank of the Nambul river and just ready to storm the palace," Chaobhal said with a trembling voice. An electric thrill ran through the body of the Senapati. He said, "Well then, why you shout; stop all this. It is war! It is a game. I may loose or I may gain in the battle! But don't shout. The kuts may be frightened," the Senapati said patting his shoulders.

The still evening was broken by the flurry of horses galloping in the darkness; all the big gates were slammed against the raiders. All the sardars, poilas and kuts rushed out of their barracks. Senapati Tekendrajit looked at the general who stood nodding his head, his fingers waving unconsciously in the empty air. Both jumped on their horses and galloped towards the chamber of the Maharajah. Dismounting just at the stairs, the two rushed towards the sanggai-phamang. To their surprise, they saw Maharajah Surchandra standing with his silver state sword brandishing in the air. Premamayee stood with a loaded rifle in her hand. His retainers guarded the king and his Maharani holding spears, swords and shields and some took positions with loaded martini rifles.

"What is all this, Yambung?" the Senapati shouted to Surchandra quite surprised. "I am afraid, Yambung hardly counts my loyalty

to Srijut and my service to my mother-land."

"Dear brother, Koireng, I shall go to the battle first. What they want is my head or my throne! Let them take my gaddi and my head too," Surchandra said in an excited voice.

The Senapati knelt before the Maharajah under the oil-light. Old Thangal stood quite unperturbed.

"Srijut, let us have a chat for a while recalling the many youthful stories of love and romance, and may I present a paan to Srijut, munching it, let us have a talk quite peacefully," old Thangal said in a soft and unbroken tone. He opened his silver paan casket.

Surchandra dropped his state sword.

"Srijut, please forget all these rows. Have a slumber in your resting place and have beautiful dreams. What is this row, I can't comprehend, all illustrious sons of Sir Chandrakirti. All will say it is a pretender's battle for the gaddi but am I dead and gone? Old Thangal who served five kings is still alive. Be it a pretender's battle, if so what, did I not discharge my duties to Srijut and to my motherland? Did I fail in my duties, or do people think that I am pushing over eighty, an octogenarian senility creeping over my marrows, oh no, Srijut," the old man said in broken sobs, "Srijut, the Senapati and I did not run from the threat of such a fugitive rebel who learns only to run from the battle-field!"

"Ipu, I did not discount your courage and valour but if Borachaoba is at the Chirai gate, I wanted to have a duel. This was all I wanted not troubling the Senapati and Ipu Thangal," Surchandra said in a shaky voice.

"Srijut, please believe your younger brother. If I cannot bring Borachaoba dead or alive to-day or tomorrow, I loose my head," Tekendrajit said falling prostrate before the king "and Yambung, please take rest and proceed to the sanggai."

All walked towards the chamber of the king. And after this the Senapati and old Thangal mounted their horses and galloped towards the Top Garod. They found that all the ministers and princes were already inside the darbar. Ushaba was busy in ushering the generals in the darbar. All the ministers sat quite dumb. Prince Angousana and Gopalsana stood with their hands on the hilts of their swords. An eerie atmosphere reigned in the

Top Garod. Old Thangal munched paan in his mouth. His toothless mouth munched and munched ceaselessly.

"All princes, illustrious sons of Sir Chandrakirti, find out a way to capture the rebel;" Thangal said in a sing-song manner and he dozed off snoring.

The darbar went on, each about to grapple each other's throat accusing each other. The Senapati watched them silently while the old general was snoring and with a jerk, the latter opened his eyes and said, "How far have you all proceeded, Sanaton? And what is time now?"

"Ipu, just twelve midnight!" Where is Borachaoba? Is he still fishing on the flooded Nambul river? Let him fish all the night while I snore inside the Top Garod. Call a top-major and send off a few cannon balls to make Borachaoba catch more fish?" Thangal said wiping his eyes with a kerchief.

"Sanaton. Kumudini, the Raj Mata was a superb general and an inimitable lady who had mastered all the logistics. She once called me in her chamber and whispered to me 'Kangaba, nobody would enter the palace on the day of akadashi, the day of fasting; and to-day is not akadashi but tomorrow is the akadashi, Sanaton, tell the bell-keeper of the Lord Govinda and let him ring the mangala arati and let us all sleep soundly".

The old man's words stultified all those sitting inside the Top Garod. All rode from their chairs and with their hands on the hilts of the swords they rushed outside the Garod.

All left save the Senapati and old Thangal; both shook their hands and had a hearty laugh.

"Sanaton, is it not that to make a triumphal march in the palace on the day of akadashi is meaningless. Just listen, the temple bell is ringing now how sonorously and how majestically? And how it dispels any fear from battles and any worry! Once the mangala arati is sounded by the God-made bell we have the akadashi, we enjoy tomorrow while we sit and talk on to-day"! Ha, ha."

Both rose from the chairs and they walked out of the Top Garod, and they stood on the stairs of the Top Garod looking all the kuts and poilas standing at their posts; all the cannon were poised towards the western gate which was lighted with the oil-

lamps as bright as day-light. Some beat their drums.

"What is in the Brajabashi's sleeves, Sanaton, let us put our heads together, he is a great devotee of Lord Govinda and he won't act anything! And tomorrow let us meet him at Iroishemba!" Thangal said in a matter-of-fact-tone. "if the bell rings Lord Govinda rises with the day and no sane warrior could march to storm the home of the God that is the palace!"

Borachaoba and his mercenaries waited the hour to storm the palace under the Khongnang-hogaibi in the darkness of the night. To their surprise, they saw oil lights lit the western gate and the temple bell pealed and pealed at such an unusual hour. "How great is the generalship of Thangal, I am just astounded to see all this! How could I storm the palace, when Lord Govinda is just awake and why is the Lord's slumber broken at such an hour!" shouted Borachaoba in utter disappointment, "Lord Thou hast not favoured me!" He turned towards Brajabashi saying "Brajabashi, nothing save retreat to Iroishemba and we shall meet the old general and the Senapati tomorrow." With tears in his eyes, he bowed his head towards the temple of Lord Govinda and knelt saying "Lord, Thou are the giver and everything is in Thy hands. Show kindness to us, poor folks!"

The temple bell tolled and tolled with sonorous and ringing sounds in the darkness of the night. Borachaoba jumped on his horse and shouted to his followers, "Heiho, let us leave this place and encamp at Iroishemba!"

Next day the sun shone with unusual brilliance; the kuts and lallups prepared to repulse the raiders. Senapati Tekendrajit and General Thangal rode on the palanquins under the silk canopies with frills fluttering in the morning wind. Prince Angousana rode on an elephant sporting his martini rifle. Behind them walked on foot two thousand kuts while the band music sounded its music resounding in the air. Half a dozen porters carried the Senapati's palanquin as the kuts wended through the thickets of bamboos at Langjing. The stillness of the morning was broken by the fusillades from the rebel army from the heights of the nearby hills of the Iroishemba. The Senapati rode his palanquin unheeded but the bullets came showering on him. Bullets whizzed past him and ricocheted on the nearby rocks. A bullet whined towards him and broke the palanquin of the Senapati making the bearers scuttling from the scene; the Senapati stood quite motionless

quite unperturbed and composed. "Tonu subedar, come and come, let us see what type of muskets the rebels carry!" Senapati Tekendrajit said in his normal and homely voice, "come, let us see." He took the bayonet from his rifle and handed over to the subedar who dug out the bullets from the ground. "Oh, the rebels of course, wish to enter the palace with such bullets," he said as he pretended not to vex on the running away of his kuts. He held the bullet in the air and showed it to all those who covered themselves in the ditches and bushes around. "Oh, sons of the soils, come forwards, time comes to pursue the fleeing rebels," he shouted as he drew his sword and he jumped on a nearby horse. Shots rang all around. "Hell, the rebels come to storm the palace with such arms," he shouted as he was about to charge alone. The kuts saw the unusual scene and sensed that their commander-in-chief was left quite exposed to the grape-shots from the enemy, they swarmed around him and charged shouting the war-cry "Senapati ki fate hua! Senapati ki fate hua!" The kuts made a human wall around their leader. The Senapati charged while old Thangal went on charging from another flank. The elusive Borachaoba found that there was no other escape route this time like the battle-field of Nambol.

The only escape route was sealed by the native soldiers of Lt. Harris who sounded bugles sending the message that the Queen's force was at hand. Borachaoba was encircled by the royal army and the British infantry. He made a bold dash towards the royal line but he was mauled by the royal tough, Kutheiba Keirungba on the rain-soaked grass; Brajabashi, finding that he backed a wrong horse, surrendered to the royal army. In the melee, the tall and white Lt. Harris walked towards Senapati Tekendrajit and he held his hand with a jovial smile saying, "Your Royal Highness, Senapati Tekendrajit, the gol mal is now over, I noticed your tact and calm composure during the shot-out which restored confidence among the ranks and turned the course of the battle." Both shook hands with beaming smiles.

The prisoners-of-war were bound in chains and led to the palace in the autumn breeze. Cat-calls and boos filled the evening sky on seeing the prisoners of war; but Borachaoba, the rebel-chief walked heavily dishevelled and tattered in clothes, bound in chains. Like all rebels he met an ignominious end but his face blackened with soots and gunpowder encountered the beaming

face of Maharajah Surchandra at the western gate flanked by his ministers, "Sana Borachaoba, the heroic Yaiskullakpa, welcome in my poor hutment and let us have a good dinner like the old time."

An uncanny silence reigned the scene.

All the inmates of the palace were jubilant on hearing the rebels were captured and put in the cells of the jail at the Nongpok engkhol and latter they learnt that Borachachaoba was sent to the Hazaribagh jail. They were sent off escorted by Lt. Harris and his light infantry. Brajabashi had to spend his days at the jail at the Nongpok engkhol. He repented that he fought an unnecessary battle for an ill-fated prince. Said he, "To be a king is written on his fate not to be made by the wishes of his followers!" Quite contented with his fate, he spent his days in the jail quite happily.

Prince Pakkasana, the Sagol Hanjaba returned from the pilgrim quite saggy, journey-worn and starry-eyed. His journey took a good many weeks and on returning home he found that his elder brother Tekendrajit became the Senapati after the untimely death of Prince Jallakirti who was smitten by the great pox. Prince Pakka never failed to pay visit the chamber of Maharajah Surchandra and gossiped with him all the intelligence he collected from all the directions, such as the Bilingsgate market of the Sanakeithel, the boozing dens of the nearby villages, the mandavs of the villages where the clap-songs were held in seasons and out-seasons. Maharani Premamayee invited him to sumptuous dinners but the prince relished shaireng fish most. The young prince, Lukhoisana, the curly son of Maharajah Surchandra was a favourite of the Sagol Hanjaba who went on asking the latter for all the tales of intrigues in the palace. A favourite dish for the young prince! Yubarajah Kulachandra also visited the Maharajah for sumptuous dinners but he relished ngakra fish, magur and he was known as 'ngakra-chaba prince'. On each dinner, he found the Sagol Hanjaba and his retinues, Rasa Raj and Moni Lal Dey. Royal retinues were many and as strange as the lallups from the far villages. But Rasa Raj and Moni Lal Dey talked more freely with the saintly Yubarajah as his house mates. And the two had oily tongues and the Yubarajah liked them. The latter knew that the two retinues could speak as if the tongue has no bones. Saintly in his daily life, quite free from any palace intrigues, he,

in his capacity as the Yubarajah visited almost all the villages far and near. But he insisted on having his favourite dish of ngakra. As soon as he sat comfortably in the chamber of the Maharajah, Prince Lukhoisana would sit on his lap and had himself with the paan from the Yubarajah's mouth; a sign of great affection among the relatives. "Come, Lukhoisana, have some chewed paan from your poor uncle," Kullachandra said calling the young prince.

Tekendradhaja, the young son of the Yubarajah was a favourite companion of Prince Lukhoisana who always accompanied his father to the palace. In return, Lukhoisana also visited the sanggai of the Yubarajah. The latter's son invited Lukhoisana to see the armoury of his father and they vied their fathers' collection of arms lying in the armouries. One day Lukhoisana told his uncle, the Sagol Hanjaba that his father being the Maharajah was far superior in arms!

"A saintly Yubarajah, no danger would pose from such sickly prince," the Sagol Hanjaba told the young prince quite confidently.

"What about the Senapati, uncle, he is an acrobat who could fly above the palace gate, hey, uncle Koireng jumping with a jugful of water over the gate! Presto, I am quite afraid of this uncle. What do you think, Uncle Sagol Hanjaba?" Lukhoisana said holding his shoulders, "What would happen if he is angry with you or my dad?"

"Lukhoisana, come and sleep now," Maharani Premamayee called him from her bed-room. She shooed and shooed him boxing his ears.

Since Prince Pakkasana's return from the pilgrimage for consignment of the mortal remains of his father and the Raj Mata, he took frequent walks through the silveroak trees-lined road to the fort-palace and had attended the evening prayers at the Lord Govinda; his elder brother, Surchandra waited till he came to his chamber and both went to the temple to offer both flowers and prayers. Rasa Raj and Moni Lal accompanied his master almost like shadows. The new Maharajah's precious time

was more devoted to prayers rather than to the discharge of his royal duties. Indeed, the old retainers loved him for his devotion to Lord Govinda. But the peasants came from the far flung villages on the muddy and inaccessible roads on foot and waited to offer darshan to the Maharajah and if possible, to apprise the ruler of the abject poverty. The land was scanty and barter was almost universal in the land. The harvest was bad and the peasant starved. The ruler promised a new coin to be struck but he was always procrastinating.

Pakka guarded the new Maharajah like a mother pigeon; he coaxed almost all the visitors and he became more prominent in the palace. He was the chief confidant. He raised a secret ring of adherents specialised in almost all the branches of war and flattery too. Who could flatter one's own brother, the old retainers said frequently. His bunch of followers practised almost all the sophisticated arms on the royal polo-ground in the morning. The prince was almost an excellent shot and a good swordsman!

The prince was an arambai-tendong expert. A throw-arrow weapon which could be hurled backward and sideward from under the neck of a galloping horse. He demonstrated his skill by galloping his black horse on the royal pologround half the other end and swinging the end of the string in his hand he dashed towards the target board; sliding down the other side of his black horse, he released metal arrow under the neck of the speeding horse making a swerve; it darted like a bolt with swishing sound and hit the bull's eye with a cracking sound. Clapping followed jubilantly all around. The prince picked up speed and galloped at break-neck speed towards the other end of the ground and taking an arambai-tendong from the saddle he dashed again towards the target-board and near the target he made a sudden swerve and made a backward sling from the racing horse and hit the bull again; all cried and shouted throwing their turbans. Again with a lightening speed he raced towards the target board with the flurry of his black horse and hit the bull's eye. A shrill cry sounded. Clappings and shouts echoed and echoed. Prince Gopalasana and Prince Tambousana stood looking at the extraordinary feat of their brother without blinking their eyes.

"A superb warrior! A superb warrior equal to none, the only prince who could hit the bull's eyes with the arambai tendong from a speeding horse thirteen times out of fifteen; Who could

defeat such a prince in any battle!" Rasa Raj shouted in his shrill voice throwing his turban in the autumn wind.

Senapati Tekendrajit rode past the southern gate towards the fort-palace on his chestnut horse and behind him followed Chaobhal on his pony; they rode along the pologround under the silveroak trees lined road. Like walking his goose-steps the Senapati's retinue was seen bending forward, his pointed chin thrusting and he pointed his hand towards the place where the arambai-tendong practice was held. The prince also looked towards the place which attracted almost a sizable crowd at the far end of the pologround. Behind came a young prince and overtook them and he also pointed towards the small crowd. All knew the prince was no other than Jillangamba, the youngest son of Sir Chandrakirti whose thin body they could recognise and they also knew that the young prince rode with the Senapati being of closer interests.

An uncanny silence ensued among the crowd as they saw the Senapati ride towards them. All focussed their eyes on the approaching riders. Of late they knew that Prince Pakka spoke disparagingly of the Senapati because although he was tipped to be the senapati, Tekendrajit had already been given the senapatiship without asking his consent. Being the younger brother of the ruling Maharajah, he said he could be given priority. But he discounted that the succession of events like the rebellion of Borachaoba made him the senapati. He looked at his brother with his lips tight.

Prince Pakka, in sweltering heat took another arambai-tendong and rode his horse in front of the racing wind and making a round he galloped his horse at break-neck speed and supporting himself on one side of the horse under the saddle he threw the weapon from under the horse's neck, and hit the same target.

Jilla nudged the Senapati and whispered to him "Yambung, it is a challenge, just see Yambung Pakka stands with his hands on his waists amidst the acclaim of his retinues!"

Pakka's retinues whispered among themselves "The Senapati is no equal to anybody in this land, in any feat, fencing, archery and arambai-tendong too!" All knelt before the prince and looked at the prince, who nodded his head slowly. He sat on his horse engrossed in some last minute thought. An idea, almost a

prank! A shepherd could scan between the good and bad sheep in the herd in any place. A warrior would taste the blade of any sword and sees himself how sharp is the weapon. The Senapati said yes no. He sat still on the horse back while Jilla pressed him to defeat the champion in the arambai-throw feat. And that in front of his adversary's own eyes! At last he dismounted from his horse and went gracefully towards Rasa Raj who held a bag of arambais. He took half a dozen arambais and he walked towards his horse and jumped on the animal which pranced neighing in the stillness of the morning. The prince rode at break-neck speed towards the northern end of the pologround and turned back speeding towards the target board. Making a sudden bend near the target he stooped his head on the eternally jerking long neck of the horse with waving long mane and hurtled the sharp arrow on the target board hitting just two inches above the bull's eyes. The onlookers clapped but short of the former; the Senapati again picked up speed and made a round at break-neck speed and near the target he darted the arrow to the target; with an exploding sound the target-board quivered like a reeling man. Hit the bull's eye without amiss. So went on till he could hit the target six or seven times. Pakka watched the game with a wan smile and he sensed that his brother lost his old vigour as well as precision. The Senapati's horse raced with its tail like a flag-pole. Everybody thought that even a cheetah could hardly follow his chestnut horse. Turning back he dashed with the rustling sounds and threw the arambai towards the target but it hit the bull's eye wide of the mark. The on-lookers dazed with alacrity on hearing the loud thud. The target board swayed in the wind. Sweltering in sweat, the Senapati picked up another arambai and galloped towards the other end of the royal pologround. All wondered how the prince failed to hit the target. Pakka grinned and looked askance to Rasa Raj and Moni Lal Dey. The latter laughed in his sleeves. All looked at the prince galloping towards the target blinded with sweat and the gusts of the autumn wind. A cracking was heard as he threw the arambai which flew over the target board. It sent titters among the small crowd!

The Senapati galloped off his chestnut horse cursing the unfortunate animal, whipping it mercilessly. The animal breathed heavily and looked suspiciously at his rider; it stretched its long neck like a crane. Like a camel groaning under the sweltering heat of the desert and the heavy merchandise! The horse began

to duck its head snorting with sullen staring eyes. It galloped and galloped, its body in unwieldy, sagging tremours.

All looked at the racing prince pitiously and they even sensed that they themselves were vanquished. Precisely within a few seconds! It would take days, weeks and months to recover his lost prestige, they whispered among themselves. He hung his face quite exasperated and while riding on his chestnut horse, the green turf around him swung around him. He could not believe his own eyes and he unconsciously showed his front tooth as he ground his teeth. Trickle of sweat blinded him and made him think whether it was a night-mare or a reality. The prince wanted to say something but his voice failed only his broken tooth protruded forwards. Whipping with snapping sounds he drove his horse at a speed but he hardly realised, only his feeling of winning an overwhelming victory instantaneously in a single stroke made him think that he was driving towards the target or his ignominious end.

Young Jilla repented that he had nudged his great brother to join the game of feat on that fateful morning; he wanted to leave the place all at once. He stood on the ground almost frozen and sensed that his feet weighed more than he could lift. He thought he could fly from the place of shame in a minute. Rasa Raj came near the young prince and said "The Senapati's time is now almost gone and he has to see the reality of life; Prince Pakka could hit the bull's eye thirteen or fourteen times out of eighteen but the Senapati could hit the target only five or six times! A poor feat!" Moni Lal looked askance at him and blinked at him. Jilla almost drew the sword but the saner thought restrained him. Chaobhal stood close to the young prince and drew his achkon suggesting him to leave the place as soon as possible. The Senapati threw away the arambai and he turned his face towards Prince Pakka and opened his mouth but he suddenly changed his mind and he whipped his horse with a smacking sound and off he rode past the crowd. In a literal sense he was defeated by Prince Pakka and this he could not bear before the crowd and he had overheard what the retinue of the young prince had said. Galloping towards the western gate without any words to the young prince he flew past the huge gate at a time when the crowd assembled at the Sanakeithel market-place. The crowd made way for the transient ire of the galloping horse.

Young Jilla and Chaobhal also took their horses and galloped towards the western gate and when they reached the gate the galloping Senapati was out sight. And shading his eyes with his hand the young prince scanned the crowd in the blinding dazzle of the sun at the noon time. Prince Jilla and Chaobhal trotted towards the rows of the shops along the banks of the Nambul river. Perhaps the Senapati might have tea at one of the shops of the bazaar. At the Basak's or Partha's or Paul's! They trotted till they reached the gorylooking tamarind tree and made way for the south where the rows of shops started on either side of the road.

Prince Jilla dismounted from his horse in front of Basak's shop and said calling "Basak Babu, did you see Yambung?" The shopkeeper namasted to the young prince and had him tea chatting on the affairs of the state and the many tales of humour and love.

Saggy and tired, the Senapati trotted along the little rivulet of the Naga on his chestnut horse. Where he did ride no one could guess! He sat on his horse quite withdrawn and saw nobody on the road. The firebrands moved carried in the hands of the market-vendors casting huge and unshapely shadows on the road. Both the rider and the animal were drenched in sweat, tears and the like! The rider cantered his chestnut horse along the palace moat cooling his sweltering head in the evening breeze. As he came around his sanggai he saw the kuts had already retired to their barracks; only the oil-lights flickered along the cobbled raj path. Quite frightened, the kuts on night-watch looked at the rider from the corners of their eyes. Trot, trot the horse went towards his master's sanggai while the flying foxes fluttered their thin and broad wings in the darkness dripping with drops of water-like sweat, dog-tired the animal looked at the prince sideways from the corner of its eyes; the syce sensed that a rancorous mood had a hold over his master because his riding on the spree in the country-side after his defeat in the arambai throw on the polo-ground was known almost by every inmates in the palace. He waited anxiously near the gate under the flickering oil-lamp and to his surprise, he saw not a single soul near his residence and he sat near the gate listening to the beating of the wings of the flying-foxes flying off the huge peepul tree that grew near the gate. All of a sudden, he looked up and found his master

sitting on his chestnut horse swaying with sweat all over his face and rose from his seat and knelt before his master on the road-side saying, "Sanakhwa, the Kotwal has returned!" He paced quickly on his heels following the horse towards the courtyard. The prince dismounted from the horse and handed over the bridle to him who looked closely at the poor animal which shivered in sweats. The syce smoothed the flanks of the horse with his palms and looked at the prince who walked towards the verandah with the horse-whip in his hand." A hell-cat he is! "said the syce to himself as he tended the horse "he hates everything that has relation with the Sagol Hanjaba!"

The night was sweltering with heat and it showed its stillness, with the bright stars shining over the rows of silver-oaks. The syce almost wept as he sat over a rickety stool near the stable and dozed off on the seat amidst the buzz of swarming mosquitoes. His short spell of sleep was broken by the snapping sound of the leather horse-whip. He jumped off the seat and saw, to his surprise, his master whipping the horse which ramped helplessly with pitiable neighs. The whip lashed with loud exploding sounds in the darkness of the early dawn. The syce looked at the poor animal helplessly without knowing what to do.

The old general got intelligence that the Senapati had a bout of his old tantrum and he could easily aver that young Pakka's dig at his elder brother's tip for the senapatiship during his itinery to Brindaban was made without his consent but the second battle of Borachaoba, the pretender had quickened the decision. "The Yubarajah's retinues," Pakka lamented in the Maharajah's chamber one late night, "but the distress signal of five cannon shots would make all the able-bodied men, lallups and kuts to flock under the royal flag!"

The old general sent his son, Lamphel to the Senapati's sanggai with a message; "See your Ipu immediately at my residence for an outing at the village of Lambal." The Senapati shunned ostentious princely dresses and rode on a palanquin to the old general's residence and he sat on a thick mat with the old man talking about ending the British interference in no time. On a full moon of the autumn, they rode to the village of Lambal secretly and had the most relished dishes of fishes.

"Better live only for two days as free men rather be slaves for

ages, Sanaton," the old general bawled out thumping his thigh at the retreat cottage at Lambal.

The villagers saw some horse-riders trotting along the dusty roads between the wave-like green paddy-fields near their village, and they emerged from the corner of a tall peepul tree with spreading branches and entered the cottage with their retinues.

"Sanaton, how could you all bear insults, ignonomies and vilifications?" said the old man, "of course not, an old man of over eighty years can't even think about it. Think an Engrez sitting in the royal darbar, dispensing justice to our people, sending a prince of this soil to exile, I'm pushing over eighty, I won't mind but think if you can, I ride over obstacles, never yield, go ahead, push ahead, chop heads, ha, ha, youngman go ahead, save your country, motherland, Col. Johnstone is a soldier rather a British resident! He unfurls the Union Jack for the Queen in Manipur. Better live for two days as free men rather be slaves for ages."

Tekendrajit hung his head low, his hands on the hilts of sword, muscles flexed; they looked each other with stolen glances; each feeling his own beating of heart; feeling of pulses; feeling of the mind; thinking of the future; the ripples on the sun-danced-waves with hexagon-shaped dots; glory with life; glory with death; the balance between action and passivity; the glory on the brinkmanship; a life in waiting.

Nothing was audible except the old general's harangue.

They all held the swords in their teeth and made a vow that the British rule must end and the Maharajah be informed to make the pledge.

"But who will talk to Maharajah Surachandra? Of course, Ipu Thangal is old and he deserves respect for his grey hairs," said Tikendrajit with a quizzical look at the old man, "tomorrow, I beseech Ipu to sound Maharajah and Ojah Yengkhoiba and I go with you."

They left the retreat in the morning sunshine on the sun-beaten path; the horses sped towards the fort-palaces with the flurry of horse-hooves. Old Thangal prayed before the Gods in his red brick temple and his mistress his mistress, Sachipriya lit one hundred-and-eight batis on the altar of the Gods in the old

general's sanggai. The general fell prostrate before the Gods. He waited a new age, a new king, an upsurge and the final overthrow of John Bull. He drew in the fresh morning air and he whispered to himself, "The astral signs are, of course favourable"

He sat cross-legged on a thick double mat, his war-dress lay before him in the morning sunshine and waited the time to have a talk with the Maharajah. "Sanaton would lose no time for such a parley!" the old man said to himself.

The temple bell pealed and pealed. It was the singha-arati. Old Thangal rode on his palanquin carried by Thangjaba Chaoba and his other partners and Mongjba raced along the pologround with puffs and sighs through the southern gate. As he neared the chamber of the Maharajah, he saw Prince Tekendrajit counting time by the tap of his boots. They encountered their eyes but they did not talk to each other. Each smelling of success or instant rejection.

The sentry sounded in an imperious voice : "The Senapati Tekendrajit Bir Singh and General Thangal." The kuts standing on either side of the corridor bowed their heads. The Maharajah welcomed the two who knelt before him and said, "Dear brother and Ipu, I am quite happy to see you all. Since the banishment of Borachaoba I have had a wink of sleep and before this I could not get even a minute's rest. And Ipu and dear brother, let have a few chats like the old time.

"Srijut, do you remember when I ran from pillar to post during Sir Chandrakirti's regime," Thangal said looking at his eyes.

"Ipu, it is ungrateful to say that I, as the Yubarajah could notice such moment in Ipu's life-time! But the old James is gone and he won't come again forever!" Surchandra said as he turned his face away. "The prime minister of an independent land could be dismissed by such an Agent and now Srijut, it is your will to have a free rein in your hand to rule this land not by concessions and hukums from the sick Agent!" Thangal said in a normal, unaffected tone.

"Ipu, does it mean that we should drive away the British from this land? Ipu, please say quite freely in my chamber, think it is your own room," he said looking at the old man's face.

"Srijut, Sanaton and your old Ipu Thangal are coming to your chamber to beg my motherland's freedom from you. Srijut,

please think over and don't dismiss us abruptly. The people are crying for liberty!" the old man said, "Better live for one or two days in freedom rather than be slaves for ever, O sire, please think over!"

"But, Ipu and Koirang, who are the other people?" Surchandra asked abruptly.

"Master Yengkhoiba says the British are ever victorious and nothing could stop them." Tekendrajit said with his face in a sullen look.

"Ipu, it is a good thing if we could rule ourselves and nobody likes to live under one's nose but, Ipu, let us discuss the matter with all the ministers in near future," Surchandra said in quick and cacophonic tones, "but Ipu, let the matter be discussed in the darbar!"

A dead silence ensued. Old Thangal looked up quite surprised and felt a sudden despondency in his heart and he opened his mouth agape quite helplessly. The prince looked at his brother quite expressionless and he was struck with surprise at Surchandra's saying in a tone of indifference.

"Ipu, there is enough time to muse on such trivial things, just think over when a pretender collects a good deal of guns and mercenaries to storm the palace, we have nothing but to make request to the Agent sahib. Sir Chandrakirti said one day, by that time he was alone in his chamber 'Sura, the Political Agent is worth a brigade!' This land is infested with pretenders and as a Maharajah, I hardly could have a nice slumber. The alarm signals of cannon always haunt me," Surchandra said with a shaky voice.

"Srijut, so long your Ipu is alive no fear could haunt your sleep!" Thangal said in a sedate tone.

"The pretender is still alive!" Surchandra said almost in a broken voice, "a ruler in this land cannot forget this proposition!"

Senapati Tekendrajit side-glanced to Thangal and they knelt before the Maharajah and left the chamber crest-fallen.

After the banishment of Borachaoba, there was peace in the land; the merchandise from the far-flung villages were brought on the Imphal river as well as the Nambul river. Maharajah Surchandra, after the coronation thought that going to the Lord Govinda's temple and doing anahics in his worshipping-room

would bring prosperity in the land and a safeguard to his throne. Like all human beings he began to make a close circle for himself and the chasm between the step-brothers and his own brothers became manifest. Now the Raj Mata was already dead! Had she been now she would exorcised the evil spirit from the palace.

Senapati Tekendrajit and General Thangal never talked about the conspiracy against the British any more. But they used to talk to each other in the Top Garod. The old man would sit on an arm-chair and snored off at the noon as he puffed the placid smoke of his sweat-scented tobacco. The Senapati was busy in distribution of kuts to the distant outlying stations. And when he was free he went to the old general's room but he was not found there. The Senapati tapped his boots as he scratched his head. "The old general always cavorts in a war-psychosis," he said as he smiled without a word and he sensed that he might pay a courtesy call at Prince Pakkasana's sanggai.

The gossip-mongers of the Sanakeithel sat late hours on the ground near the market-place. They came from the nearby villages, Sagolband, Uripok and Keishamthong and they talked from the price of dried fish in the market to the number of embroidered phanek of a shija!

Meechao Lallup, tall and erect with a gauche face came with his cow-hide sandals dragging on the dusty road; his over-sized feet protruding out of the hide. Tapping his sandals on the pakka flour, he traipsed on the corridor of the Top Garod calling "Ushaba, Ushaba, where is the senapati?"

"What do you want Meechao lallup, you came screening the firmament and please take offence I say something, if I go on battle-field I will go behind you and I won't get even the fusillade from the enemy's line! Ushaba said as he came out of the Senapati's room putting out the thick screen, his face all beaming.

"Ushaba, what I mean is where is the Senapati? Left the sanggai at 8 O'clock saying Shija, Shija, just have a urgent business in the Top Garod, but not yet turned up for the mid-day meals and Shija is waiting to take lunch with the Senapati," the tall lallup said as he stood on the threshold. Ushaba looked at his gawky cotton shirt.

"The Senapati hardly has time to sit on the chair and it seems he is preoccupied with some important affairs of the state;

General Thangal is shuttling between the Sagol Hanjaba and Srijut or the Senapati," Ushaba said in a quick voice, "the old man sat late hours inside the Top Garod."

"Ushaba, what they are up to, again after the battle of Bora-chaoba?" the tall lallup asked quite bluntly.

"Hush, Meechao, they are going to hook a big bird, don't disclose it to others!" Ushaba said with his finger on his lips, "the pretender's syndrome!"

"What is all about this?" said Meechao.

"Woh, have you heard that the Wangkheirakpa had lifted the two-hundred-fifty tola gold pipe of the Maharajah from his chamber and the Maharajah invited him to a sumptuous dinner and told him 'The Wangkheirakpa, the gold pipe is just my looking-glass, one of mementoes of Sir Chandrakirti who used it, and please restore it to me, for without it I cannot pass time!' Ushaba said to Meechao, "the Wangkheirakpa pleaded innocence and just think two hundred fifty tolas of gold could raise an army and even procure a gaddi!"

"But, Ushaba, do you believe that the Wangkheirakpa is the culprit, a man so noble and so decent and a minister of the royal court. I cannot comprehend this," the tall man said quite surprised, "hai, hai, it is a trumped-up charge!" he said with his head nodding in total surprise.

"Oh. hush, I'm just wrong to leak out this to you, the tall simpleton!" Ushaba shouted quite discontented and he became suddenly reticent.

"Ushaba, could you believe that a bull walks on a urok-thong, a single-bamboo bridge and if you have the opportunity of seeing such a spectacle, don't tell others lest you will be called a fool!" Meechao said looking at Ushaba.

"You're too tall to comprehend all this! It is a human nature to crave for riches and everybody likes to be a king," Ushaba said as he stroked the tall lallup's bosom out of affection and both laughed loudly.

"A crystal ball knows the inner core of the human mind," Thangal went on saying as he paced up and down in the Top Garod while Prince Pakkasana looked at the old general like a nightmare. It sees the past and the future! Sir Chandrakirti

pampered his sons. His love for his children was so much that he sent his shallakpa to Pundit Purnachandra to attend the palace at once. His hukum was so great that non-obedience would send him to Sugnu downcaste and exiled. The king was always in bad health and he had the premonition that he would die very soon. "To whom shall I leave my gaddi?" he shouted one day and he walked like a sonambulist and in the morning his face looked like a gauche. On doorstep, the Pundit stood before him like a frightened rat. "Pundit," the king shouted at the old man, "have you not brought your kits, the crystal ball?" The pundit looked in wonder and said, "Srijut, it is your hukum, why should I fail to obey?" "Well, Pundit, I cannot get a wink in the night. So many nights I passed without a sleep, why I worry, oh pundit, if you have had ten sons, you could understand the depth of my sorrows," the Maharajah said in a shaky voice, "to-day you must read your crystal-ball and tell me who would sit on the gaddi in the palace? Oh. pundit, you say this but it should not reach the ears of anybody, mind that." "Srijut," the old pundit said and he bowed his head, and he became reticent for a moment. "Srijut, it portends no good who could wrest the throne from your illustrious sons!" he said hanging his head.

"Pundit, only you obey my hukum and no talk", Sir Chandrakirti said to the old pundit and they went to the cave of the mythical king of Pakhangba and they read the crystal ball, which showed Angousana, son of Raja Nar Singh, and next came Borachaoba, the second son and the last appeared Sajousana, the father of Dinachandra, the Wangkheirakpa. The Maharaja summoned the father of the Wangkheirakpa in his secret chamber and said, "Sajousana, you are the son of a great king, and you see who could be the Senapati of this land and you see all my young sons are only learning to walk on the earth, this mother. Don't wage any battle against me, you live in peace and let us serve our motherland!"

This happened at a time when Prince Surchandra was quite young but old Thangal played the harp on the old tale. Borachaoba, the Yaiskullakpa and Sajousana, the Senapati attended the palace everyday and it was as good as one on a parole. Borachaoba likewise failed to attend the palace on the day of the death of Sir Chandrakirti and now he was passing his days in the Hazaribagh jail! Now the time came for the Wangkheirakpa. Cursing his fate

to be the son of an old Maharajah, he trudged on the cobblepath and he said to himself, "The old tale of the crystal-ball reading is now at hand and old Thangal is the Satan. Am I not on a parole, am I not on a parole? I, who never had stolen even a steel needle or a mustard-seed am accused of lifting the two-hundred-fifty tola weighed gold-tobacco pipe, am I a thief, accusing of stealing a gold tobacco pipe for not lifting the same! Old Thangal, you do whatever your conscience thinks right and ask yourself, did the Wangkheirakpa steal the pipe from the custody of Maharajah. Just a conspiracy hatched by old Thangal and, now my time is now over and I had lived overhile. Poor Borachaoba was not a fool! Step by step, these sons of Sir Chandrakirti would shadow us whenever I go and live. But I must attend the palace everyday lest I break the parole. Giving us titles and decorations I did wait my deathknell attending palace daily on a parole!"

All the inmates of the palace watched him pacing on the cobble-road and some looked at him from the corners of the roads, walls and from the barracks of the kuts. "He, man, your time is now over and it is your shadow that is walking! Old Thangal's cut you in your shadow!" One morning, they saw the Wangkheirakpa walking on the palace road sporting the gold pipe in his hand in the broad-day-light. All looked aghast at the gold pipe and then at the poor Dinachandra. They soon learnt that the latter went straight to the bed-room of Prince Pakkasana, the Sagol Hanjaba one afternoon and raised the mattress and took the gold pipe hidden by the Sagol Hanjaba. The Wangkheirakpa said nothing but he walked on the cobbled path without a word, his face quiet and composed. "But my time is over, now, I only wanted to tell the world that I did not lift the gold pipe from the chamber of the Maharajah. Only to prove that my ancestors and I do not belong to a family of a common felon or a thief. Was I born to throw my ancestors in the hell!" He handed over the pipe to the Maharajah and left the palace in haste without saying anything to the latter.

The kuts and the gossip-mongers of the Sanakeithel whispered among themselves that a pretender's battle was in sight. "Better keep dried fish, salt and chillies for a new pretender's battle!" Some lamented his fate.

The palace was seized in panic to find that one fine morning a

good number of prisoners had scaled the jail at the Nongpok-Inghol and General Thangal went on haywire on the jail-break. With gasping breaths he rode on a palanquin carried by the kuts in the early morning and he walked talking like a raving mad man, "No man is cavorting with jail-breaks, mind you!" Sawaijamba Balaram looked at his companion with a scepticism and he grinned with a thinly painted smile. His smile was a classic diplomacy. Giridhari, the Angom Ningthou looked in askance and with a gentle look he paced towards the Maharajah's chamber in a jaunty air.

"Who could be? The Wangkheirakpa has the make-up of a rebel? Tell the Sagol Hanjaba to put all his brothers' head together and decide what to do?" Thangal said with a sullen look as he paced on the sanggai phamang.

The missing of the gold pipe was the talk of the town of Imphal and all knew that the Sagol Hanjaba and the old general were the schemer to eliminate the Wangkheirakpa and his clan. A pretender's battle syndrome! They later learnt that Ngangba and Kala and Kombireisana, the Sangaillakpa were thrown in the lock-up of the Top Garod by Maharajah Surchandra and General Thangal after grilling them with interrogations. "Who could get me rid of the Wangkheirakpa?" Surchandra bawled out to the royal thumping the heavy table in the darbar on getting the intelligence that the rebels had mustered at the house of the rebels on the day the tarpan in the month of Langban; in every family the near and dear ones joined the anniversary of their dead ancestors. Many dhoti-clad men and ureirom coloured phanek clad-ladies streamed in the gate of the Wangkheirakpa on the day of the tarpan at the time of the noon.

General Thangal watched the whole thing from a strong power-glass. The old man had everything in his paan casket and he took out one paan and he handed over a big bunch of paan to Prince Tekendrajit who stood watching the old general. Both stood at the gate of the Top Garod. Both munched the paan. The old general's silver paan casket contained a plot and a puzzle, the people said, he simply opened the casket after he had solved the puzzle! The old general shouted, "Tarung Subedar, you rush to the spot, the sanggai of the Wangkheirakpa with the choicest and handiest arms and fifty kuts shall accompany you, and the Wangkheirakpa must be brought to the palace at any cost."

Subedar Tarung came almost running near the old general at the gate of the Top Garod. General Balaram putting on a wry smile came with gentle footsteps sporting a tobacco pipe in his hand; he puffed the pipe with placid smokes. He looked towards the dusty road past the huge western gate and he saw some white dhoti-clad men going towards the gate of the Top Garod. Among them he saw ladies also. He stood watching the scene like a festival in the spring! But his sceptic outlook overweighed him and he stood sporting the tobacco pipe and had little to convince his companion, General Thangal because of the agelong difference of opinion between the two!

With his ears raising slantly, Thangal sat on a wooden stool like a spring butterfly on a pot of honey and behind him stood the Senapati tapping his foot counting time. He ruled out any showdown at the sanggai of the Wangkheirakpa on the day of the tarpan. General Balaram sat on the chair puffing the placid grey smoke curling in the still September wind. Tarung and his fifty kuts went on the dusty road towards the gate of the Wangkheirakpa, and they went inside the latter's gate. Thangal strained his eyes towards the gate in the noon-day sunshine. A few precious moments followed. Sporadic shots rang out. Old Thangal sprung from his chair, his hand brandishing his long sword. "When did Kangaba err? The general never errs! Oh, Srijut, the game has started! The Sagol Hanjaba, come out of the fort-palace and see the new rebel just now!" he shouted.

Prince Pakka emerged out of the Top Garod and he stood near the old general. Balaram pressed out a wry smile and puffed the tobacco pipe. "But Kangaba, why do the kuts stream out of the sanggai of the Wangkheirakpa?" he shouted to Thangal who stood quite dazed at the sight. The royal kuts taking to their heels in the noon-day sunshine before their own eyes caused so great a hue and cry that Thangal walked towards the western gate.

"Hai, Laishraba kut, what happened to Subedar Tarung? Tell me quickly!" Thangal said shouting to the kut, who reached the gate first.

"General. Tarung Subedar was hit by a water jug and shot dead during the clash at the site of the feast!" the kut said a shaky voice.

"The Sagol Hanjaba and the Senapati, what!" Thangal side-glanced at the two princes. They stood, their lips agape with dry throats. They looked at the old man puckering their eyebrows.

"Top majors, roll out the sevel-pounders from the top Khanas and the time has come to fight and die for your mother-land and for Srijut!" Thangal shouted to all those who stood near the general at the gate. Sawaijamba sporting the tobacco pipe in his hand puffed the grey smoke in surprise. The cannon boomed and boomed sounding the distress signals in the mid-day sky of September. Small shots rained on the retreating kuts who went to the sanggai of the Wangkheirakpa. They ran helter and skelter towards the western gate of the palace. A stray bullet whizzed past through the towering western gate and cut the neck of the chellam of the tobacco pipe in the hand of Balaram who was ashamed to take cover stood looking at the cut-off tobacco-pipe with a smile.

After a war council in the Top Garod, Senapati Tekendrajit led a strong force to drive out the rebels who took position on the bank of Nambul river at Sagolband. After a skirmish, the Wangkheirakpa repulsed the royal force and the force had to retreat along the Naga rivulet. The rebels got berserk after the cannon shells burned the houses of the sanggai of the Wangkheirakpa. As soon as the royal forces reached the palace, a war council was raging in the Top Garod.

"But the Wangkheirakpa knows how to storm the Chirai gate and how to break-open the same!" Thangal said in a shaky voice.

The battle took a serious turn as soon as the royal forces left the battle-field on the bank of the Nambul river. The September night howled and howled in the darkness of night. As darkness wrapped the palace the shouts of war-cry almost filled the air. The sounds of small-shots filled the air; the strategic Chirai gate was stormed in the darkness of the night. The Wangkheirakpa shouted "Ngangba and Kalasana, my illustrious warriors, I have come to deliver you from the prisons and wreak vengence on those who threw you into the jail, Ngangaba and Kala;" The small arms filled the air and hand-to-hand fights ensued most fiercely at the northern gate. The royal forces had to retreat to the fort-place. The rebels headed by the Wangkheirakpa swarmed into the palace. To their surprise, they found that there was a unusual evening calm in the palace. Only the leaves of the

peepul trees fluttered in the night wind. No human soul was found there. The Wangkheirakpa sensed that the old general, Thangal was no mean enemy but where could he be found out? The arch-enemy who engineered all these plots! So illusive a victory! The old fox is now in the fox-hole! he cried. The throne is vacant now! Where would my wife and grand-daughter be? Still crying for her mother's milk in the wildernes of the Langol hills?

The Wangkheirakpa stood with his sword brandishing in the darkness of night while the wind was howling. He stood near the Thong-hogaibi and shouted "Ngangba and Kala, where are you, come out of the prison all the generals and princes have fled now." The voice echoed and re-echoed in the darkness of the night.

Dinachandra shouted and shouted at the top of his voice; nothing was so silent on no man's land and it was also the pitch dark twentysix lunar night of autumn. He looked around in the darkness but he found that none of his bulwarks were at his sides. "Ngangba and Kala, where are you, I am waiting you, the throne is now vacant and all those who occupied the palace had fled to save their necks! Hark, hark, ye people of Manipur, and all the ministers and princes in flowing silks, did I steal the gold tobacco pipe! No, never, never did I steal the paltry pipe that sucked by the late king for thirty-six years!" he shouted and shouted cupping his hands. The voice echoed and echoed in the darkness.

"Ngangba and Kala! Just come out of the jail this very moment when everybody fled from the palace. And now the throne belongs to me! Old Thangal, I know it was the plot you conspired to get me killed and exposed on the execution-ground in the day-time at the market place! People jeering at my dead body saying "Hei, the Wangkheirakpa who stole the gold pipe from the Maharajah is now tied on the stakes! Dead and gone! Ha, ha, it is the old general who concealed the gold pipe under the Sagol Hanjaba's mattress!" shouted the Wangkheirakpa in the still of the night.

The temple bell pealed and pealed. Dinachandra dropped his sword on the ground and he knelt on the ground near the Thonghagaibi. Old Thangal who watched everything through

the embrasure from the corner of the fort-palace. One cannon shell whizzed towards the sound of the cry near the bridge and threw the rebel high in the air with shrieking cries and his dead body hurtled in the dark sky and fell crashing on the ground strewn with the dry leaves of the autumn!

CHAPTER IV

At Phoijing, the royal interpreter announced the reception of the Grimwoods. Ethel walked out of the gathering towards the Yubarajah with her husband. The misty hills appeared like the Scottish valley. "Your Royal Highness, I am Ethel St. Clair Grimwood, mistress of the Political Agent," Ethel said with a smile on her lips and shook hands with Yubarajah Kullachandra and next she shook hands with Senapati Tekendrajit, her eyes lingering on his; encountering with exquisite surprises. The prince clasped her hands in his and she felt a sudden exhilaration in her heart. She looked back with lingering eyes as her heart pounded without anybody's notice. Her husband followed her shaking hands with other princes. She wondered at his charismatic smile on his red face, his newly sprouting moustache. Her eyebrows arched as she looked at his. Prince Pakkasana, the Sagol Hanjaba and Prince Thambousana, the Shamu Hanjaba stood in front of the caparison elephants and by left side, General Thangal stood with his long hands pressing out a smile on his wrinkled face who said, "Agent sahib, I saw you once visiting Manipur!" "General sahib, how you remember, precisely correct, I did visit this beautiful land! Thank you very much you remember me," he said with a smile. His wife walked before him and she saw the Senapati's face again and she smiled at other princes' faces who could speak neither Hindustani nor English. She knew that planting smiles on their faces communicated a feeling of friendship to them.

Grimwood, the young Political Agent and his young wife left the village of Phoijing riding the caparison-decorated elephants moving like the black moving waves of sea against the back-drop of the thickets of bamboos and misty distant hills beyond the seas of golden coloured paddy-fields. The Yubarajah and Senapati Tekendrajit rode on the sun-beaten road along the royal troupe. Of course, it was about seven miles' ride on the road flanked by the paddy-fields. Thangal rode on his bay horse with his orders and decorations shining on his breast and the more prominent was his white eye-brows dreeping over his sunken eyes; he looked unassuming and busied himself with his falling health. Like his old days, he looked at the Senapati while riding on the moving horse. His creased and folded face pressed out a genial

face to the latter. A strange code of communication between the two! Pakka rode on his black horse, his special liking for such a colour of his horse while the Senapati selected the chestnut coloured horse. The young prince rode abreast with the Senapati in flowing silk robes, he looked sullen and stiff; slightest exertions made him sweat and pant for breaths although so young and thick in constitution. Young Jilangamba rode beside the generals. The well-decorated elephants moved like the hills for about two hours on the dusty road. A valley with misty craggy hills had the reminiscence of the Scottish landscape. The band music flourished in the golden sunshine. A vice-regal treat!

Within minutes, the townsmen greeted the small procession, elderly white dhoti-clad men falling prostrate before the princes as they rode past them. Riding along the small river of the Nambul, they crossed the brick China bridge past the gory-looking tree on the execution ground. The Bangali merchants and banias gave namaste to the princes and the Agent standing on either sides of the road. As they reached the Sanakeithel, the band music flourished in the morning sunshine. Red carpets rolled out of the western gate and royal troops lined the gate. The cannon salute boomed and boomed thirteen times.

Maharajah Surchandra walked out of the imposing western gate with the princes and ministers. The Grimwoods dismounted from the elephants and approached on the red carpet. They shook hands with the Maharajah while the cannon-salute boomed and boomed. The white Agent and his mistress in cropped boyish hair-cut shook hands. No sound, all looked with the hearts almost missing a beat. The kuts in black dhotis watched the scene. A gasp of astonishment. After the brief ceremony, the red livery retainers and choicest Gurkha native soldiers marched off towards the residency following the Grimwoods on horses. Under a big tree near the residency gate stood all the employees of the residency. Rashid Lal Kundu stood in front of the crowd fiddling with his papers in his tight English suit. The young couple rode on the arch-shaped carriage-drive under the tall deodar and mango trees. Just in front of the thatched residency building the Union Jack greeted them on the end of a long pole.

Ethel watched the inner room and the huge teak dining-table and silver-ware and the flower-vases with orchids untidily sorted. All rooms of Major Trotter, the last English resident who died of

wounds looked gaunt, she said with a gasp of astonishment. The room appeared fluffy and prim save the haunting memory of the unfortunate last occupant. She picked up a silk dressing-gown and covered her ivory-white body with it and hummed a tune to bring a touch of homeliness in the room. She joined her husband in his room. Twitters of gold-finches and other pet-birds came from the back-yard. Through the window, she saw the gardeners tidying the garden. The little woolly bear she brought from the jungle on her way to Manipur was sucking milk from her chappasi. She had black coffee with her husband and said "Quite nice place, is it not so, Frank!" "Of course, a vice regal treat!" he said and both smiled. "Shall I hold audience with you in the residency darbar after you have given the credentials to His Highness tomorrow in the fort-palace!" she said resting her head on his shoulder.

"Even if you are willing, you must be ready," he said in a low voice, "just an ordinary ceremony, dearie, introductions and shaking hands in the residency hall here. But mind that the Oriental princes are the most informal!"

After lunch, Ethel dressed up standing in front of a life-sized dressing mirror and put roughes on her face and scented the hems of her skirt with eau de Cologne. Her maid, Moonia hung her portrait in bridal gown with her husband photographed at the Vandyk's in England.

After one day's rest, Grimwood rode to the palace darbar and gave the credentials to the Maharajah in the darbar. He was very spruce and natty as he rode the horse followed by the Gurkha soldiers. To his surprise, he saw the whitish concrete-made dragons, imposing and mythical just in front of the palace. With his mincing gaits on the red carpet he was accosted by Yubarajah Kullachandra and just at the entrance of the darbar he saw the smiling face of the Maharajah. After a few minutes, he was escorted up to the western gate by the Yubarajah and the princes and the ministers. And he left the palace riding his horse followed by the red-livery attendants of the residency.

"The protocol is that His Highness will pay a courtesy call in the darbar with his ministers and princes to me in the darbar hall in the residency after giving the credentials from the Viceroy to His Highness", Grimwood said in a matter-of-fact tone as he sat on the chair in his office.

On the next day the Maharajah and the princes appeared before the residency darbar with his dignitaries and the princes. The Senapati came riding his chestnut horse. He appeared very spruce and tidy in his pink silk achkon and silk turban with yellow orchids. The Maharajah stood waiting the young Agent under the big pe, parasol with fluttering frills. Grimwood walked with his aides and shook hands. And the darbar went on with fresh introductions of names of offices.

"Grimwood sahib, why is the memsahib absent from the darbar? Is she indisposed after the long journey?" Surchandra said looking at the young British resident.

"His Ladyship would be pleased to see His Highness?" he replied with an apologetic smile. He waved his hand to Kundu, his clerk who paced through the adjoining room. Within a few minutes she appeared with her white bonnet on her head. She planted a smile on her face as she walked across the darbar-hall and her eyes caught the Senapati's beaming eyes. While shaking hands with the Maharajah, she said "His Highness, I am quite happy to see you." On his left, she saw Tekendrajit and she moved towards him and she met her eyes while shaking hands. She felt that he had weakness at his sight but his magnetic touch dispelled all her sense of the audience. She sighed and gasped for breaths.

After the darbar, the residency appeared like a small clearing in the midst of a forest; the sixty Gurkha sepoy retired to their barracks. She looked at the whole scene like a countryhouse in England; the roses, heliotropes, jarcanda and a host of English flowers planted by the predecessors along the residency building gave a nostalgic atmosphere. She felt a sudden gusto of love. To her, the native state was a luring call of the naked sea of the tropical growth with the golden ripples of the angry sun on the scimitar-shaped lake just in front of the bangalow. The white and red lilies almost filled the lake. A few cranes waddled on the banks of the lake.

Kundu came with a letter in his hand and said "Sahib, His Highness invites you to the polo match at three to-day." Ethel took the letter from her husband and read it saying "A wonderful afternoon!" The band music flourished on the polo-ground under a big peepul tree while the dhoti-clad townsmen gathered for the polo-match. Ethel went to the polo-ground with her husband,

and they sat on raised chairs in the rostrum under a shamiayana. She saw the Maharajah ride his gold bridle pony under gold zhari canopy; afternoon sunshine shone on the gold saddle, and gold flaps. Among the princes she saw the Senapati coming out on the polo-ground in his green velvet zouave jacket and salmon dhoti, a pinkish silk turban on his head.

The polo started with the throw of the white ball between the two parties. Flurry of hooves on the ground. The Senapati hit the ball which skimmed across the ground and he galloped with his hand swirling his polo-stick in the air. The white polo ball sticks fast to the Senapati's polo-stick on the polo-ground, the people whispered among themselves. The white ball flew across the velvety lawn by the magic touch of his hockey. He hit the white ball again unchecked driving the ball into goal. All clapped and clapped. The Senapati's team won the game. Throwing of turbans in the crisp afternoon wind.

Ethel said "Who is the other team?" "Prince Pakkasana, the Sagol Hanjaba," her husband said in a whispered tone. She saw the silk turbans of the two teams placed on the polls on either side of the pologround. Her white and long neck glanced furtively. The game started again throwing the white ball between the two teams. The Senapati hit the ball across the field and he made for it again on his horse. The crowd roared and roared at the sight of the Senapati. The Sagol Hanjaba wrestled for the ball that skimmed on the ground but, to everybody's surprise, the Senapati's horse kicked the white ball into the goal. The crowd clapped and clapped; The Senapati's attendants collected the turbans staked at the match.

After the fifth chukker, the game started again with more enthusiasm and anguish. The crowd almost rose from the ground and looked at the two princes running almost at each others throat. Ethel strained her eyes furtively towards the Senapati. She almost dropped her Chinese fan from her hand. The game ended and the Senapati's team won by over-whelming scores. The olive eyed prince enchanted her with his prowess and sprightly spirit.

Hardly realising that a fashionable lady is like an antique in the musuem, Ethel walked with her ayah, Moonia along the road towards the Sanakethel, the ladies' evening market. Her cropped and boyish hair-cut and the light blouse and her whitish shoulders attracted the attention of the natives. But what they wondered

was the fulness at the back of her dress. Of course, the memsahib has a tail behind her back, they watched closely putting their fingers on their lips. Her bluish eyes, golden, blonde hairs are just bizarre! The kuts watched her while they walked on the western walls. She had an evening walk in the Sanakeithel market, a conglomeration of fish-vendors adept in Bilingsgate colloquys and dolls and handloom-fabrics. She gazed at the cloths that shone like Nature's hues, muslin chaddars, gold zhari chaddars for the princes, muslins for maidens, striped shining silk phaneks, the star-spangled dresses for the Ras dance and peacock hoods of Lord Krishna! She stood before the stall before a fat lady dropping her head like a white crane and she encountered the dark eyes of the lady who made a jovial gesture saying "Memsahib, kari pammi, what do you want?"

She nodded her head in a mood of appreciation and friendliness. Another lady on the next stall raised her hand with a silken phanek and said, "How beautiful it must be if memsahib wears this. Some other ladies were not interested in vending but in prating and retail gossips. With a smile she made a round among the stalls with Moonia. What vexed her was time? How to spend time! The long tropical day! She learnt that white officers would frequent the residency to lift her from the boredom. A band music and lawn tennis in the residency compound. Of course, the band master played waltz music in the afternoon but no lawn tennis. She lounged in her garden and she saw some palanquins near the carriage-drive. Moni Ram Das, the head-bearer came almost running and said "His Royal Highness the Senapati is visiting memsahib," "My God," she said with a falling breath. She walked towards the carriage-drive in her polka-dotted evening-dress.

"Good evening, Your Royal Highness," Ethel said as she stood looking at him.

"Same to Your Ladyship," the Senapati said. Both paced towards the big well-furnished drawing-room.

"Pretty nice afternoon, Your Royal Highness", she said as they barged into the drawing-room. She suddenly turned her face looking the change in his face. Added to this she wanted to see his face at a closer distance. Of course, a lingering look. The prince sighed and thought how lovely she was and how many a coquettish house-wives wish adventures with the prince! He saw

her walk with her, irresistible smell filling the room.

"Your Royal Highness, how grateful we are to you for precious things you sent to us on the day of our arrival at the residency!" she said with a smile with her teeth shining like pearls, "We get all the privileges of vice-regals because of Your Royal Highness, we got all the good atta, fowls, goats and a special team of labour for cleaning the whole building and tidying the living-rooms." "A special treat to the Grimwoods!"

"Memsahib, just our duty to the British resident and to you, memsahib!" he said with a smile showing his front broken tooth, "the royalty and the residency should go hand in hand together and hope this will continue in future as in the past."

"Your Royal Highness, so pretty good! I will never forget your gratitude," she said as she looked closely at his eyes. To her surprise, she found that he was manly with deep and black eyes, his eyes sparked with a mysterious beam of light shining from his spirit. She felt shame looking at his face so intently and withdrew and she had an irresistible feeling and encountered her eyes again. Both loved looking at each other and found something a feeling, a message emitting from each of them. It lingered, lingered. And without interruption!

"Your Royal Highness," she said with a sedate voice "how you could speak English?"

"McCulloch, the Agent sahib was my tutor," the Senapati said casting his look "he was a good man, very good to me, to my father, and of course to the state."

"Indeed, Frank paid a courtesy call at his bungalow at Shillong, nice, good fellow," she said with a smile.

The head-bearer placed a silver plate with dry fruits, sharbet on the table and left without a word.

"Only dry fruits, Your Ladyship," the Senapati said waving his head.

She looked at him with surprise and said, "Your Royal Highness. We are going to make our establishment quite new and also I want a fine horse for evening ride," she said, her face slanting showing her prominent cheek. "and we have to depend everything on you."

"Your Ladyship, I will send the finest horse and I hope Your

Ladyship will enjoy evening rides," the Senapati said joyfully meeting her glance.

In the morning Chaobhal came with a horse holding its bridle to the residency and handed over the animal to Ethel and she was thrilled with joy to find that the Senapati was true to his words. She walked up and down in her room and she then went to her maid's room. Finding the room stuffy, she gasped for breaths, she went to see the little bear she brought from the hill. Picking up some cakes of candy she fed the black ball-like bear. The gold finches chirped and chirped hearing her voice. Humming a music she walked on the front lawn. She heard pattering of sandals on the carriage-drive and she hastened towards the place and there she saw young girls dismounting from the palanquins. "Dearie girls, come, come, please do come, you are proceeding from the palace, I hope so? A young prince, what is your name," she said almost breathlessly. "Prince Lukhoisana," the elder princess replied. "Your Royal Highness, Prince Lu-khoi-sa-n-a. good afternoon?" she said with a smile. "Fine, memsahib," came the reply from the young prince.

She walked with all the princesses and the young prince. Mikoi and Leiren. General Thangal's daughters followed them tight-lipped, and entered the reception-room. Princess Ombi walked with tight and velvet slippers following the young prince. Mikoi, short, wheatish complexion walked silently with her sister Leiren, of the two general's daughters, the former was a little precocious and her mother was anxious for her precocity. Her brother, Lamphel had always sent one of the general's attendants to follow her secretly. Prince Lukhoi left the room on hearing the orchestrated cries of the pet animals in the backyard. Ombi and her sister discovered Ethel's room.

The head-bearer brought chocolates, dried fruits, nuts and cakes on silver trays. "Princess Ombi, please tell your sisters to take the sweets," Ethel said to the princesses. But they evaded her keeping themselves busy with giggles and titterings. Lukhoi came into the room and he went from room to room. Sporting a rifle he came out of the room and said "Look at this rifle so new! I like such rifles." "Don't play with guns," shouted Khomdon with a scornful look.

"How many cannon shots on the day of memsahib's arrival?" Lukhoi said looking at his sister.

"Thirteen," Ombi said with a sullen look.

"No ten only," said Lukhoi.

"How!"

"I listen only ten," he said.

"No, what you know? Thirteen salute guns for the Agent sahib, and twenty-one for the Kammeson sahib," Mikoi said staring on his eyes.

"What do you say, Mikoi, thirteen salute guns and so and so?" Ethel said looking at them.

All became tight-lipped and appeared quite innocent and silent.

"Memsahib, have you seen the big cannon that boomed on the day of your arrival," said Lukhoisana resting his body on the back of a sofa.

"No, my dear prince! You are quite lucky to be born as princes and princesses, I don't belong to the royalty, you understand, pretty nice to be a prince or a princess," Ethel said nodding her head, "and I have never seen a cannon—firing but I heard the cannon boomed and boomed on the day of my arrival here."

"Memsahib tells lies," Lukhoi said as he looked at her with his back and owl eyes staring on her.

"Oh, no," she made with a grunt.

"Well, I tell my father to invite you to a shell-firing," he said with a smattering of broken English and Hindustani.

"Next time, we will sit together for snaps," Ethel said as she escorted to the gate. The attendants were waiting near the carriage-drive. Waving hands, they all left on their palanquins. It was already dusk.

Ethel spent the long day-time punctuated by feeding the wee bear, gold finches and other pets and pacing through the long verandah and sitting on the chair in the garden near the artificial lake. One fine morning Ushaba, the Lallup Chingba surprised her by a letter from the Maharajah inviting her to go on riding to a nearby firing-range and see the shell-firing. Almost jumped up with the invitation, she told her syce to harness the horse with pink rosette and buck-skin side saddle and she rode the horse to the palace escorted by the palace kuts. Her husband looked at

her as she went down the stair who waved her hand to him. "Good ride, darling," he shouted to her. Ushaba followed her on his horse as she trotted on the road along the place moat towards the western gate.

Ethel was greeted with salutations from the kuts and lallups as she rode through the western gate and next she was accosted by the sentries and lallups at the gate near the Top Garod. She saw a good many horses in front of the Garod. As she rode past the darbar she saw the two sphinx-like dragons in front of the palace under tall and shady trees. "My God, who are those people, for what worships and propitiations did they construct these mythical dragons!" she said as she dismounted from her horse and handed over the bridle to an attendant who stood nearby. She saw the Senapati at the entrance of the palace who said, "His Lady-ship everything is ready."

"Morning, Your Royal Highness," she said as she walked toward him and turning her face she saw the royal retinues emerging from the Maharajah's chamber. The Maharajah sat on an elephant and behind him huge elephants followed carrying huge cast-iron cannon on their backs. After a good ride, the cannon were arranged on the wheels. The kuts planted a red flag at clearing about three hundred yards from the site of the cannon. The Senapati fired the cannon with a flash of light, a reverberating sound, The cannon shell thundered and hit the target hurling huge piles of earth. All cried in jubilation and made grunts of happiness at his markmanship. "A prince who could hit the target with so much accuracy! A superb prince!" All the ministers and generals clapped thunderously. The sound of cannon made Ethel pant with dry lips. She tried to cry something but she could not grasp anything. Her strength seemed to run away from her and her vision blurred. She tried vainly to close her eyes with her hand. She saw the Senapati kneeling beside her saying, "Memsahib, what ails you!"

The thunder-like sounds of the cannon were ringing in her ears; the cold wind blew against her face for a while and she came to her consciousness. She opened her eyes and found herself reclining on the arms of the Senapati and his warm breath falling on her face.

Ethel tilted her white back and saw the Senapati smiling at her with his front broken tooth. She saw the huge cast-iron cannon

lying before the crowd and one royal retinue shouting to lift the cannon and fix them on the wheels. The kut emerged from the crowd and lifted one end of the cannon but he could lift the whole piece. All tried but failed. The Senapati emerged from the gathering and with a grunt he lifted the whole piece and put it on the wheels. The gathering clapped.

Ethel's Gurkha orderly harnessed her horse when the evening sun painted its bountiful colour on the surrounding land-scapes. Of grey and pinkish colour. She donned her riding dresses and went tapping her heels on the paved verandah and she, calling her chapprassi told, "Jaldi ayengge sahibko batao." She mounted her horse with the horse-whip smacking in the air. She rode on the road that runs parallel to the palace-moat.

The Senapati joined her riding past the western gate and they trotted talking in Hindustani along the silver-oak trees lined road. And Ethel returned from her riding after a good ride. She was tired but she was lifted from the boredom of her green house. Her pale whitish colour had a streak of pinkishness, of youth and hope but it was illusive and intractable. After a long time she sat down to jot down on her diary in her long and elegant Italics "a mansion without a peaceful atmosphere, poor Moonia fretting over minutia of the house-hold chores in the residency. Of course, Naobi and Nembi, wives of chapprassis coveted her ayahship. Life here has all the make-ups of a Vice-regal. Frank spent long evenings taking snaps of the princesses, of them Ombi and Mikoi, a commoner visited the residency quite frequently keeping company with me."

"Memsahib, the Sagol Hanjaba is visiting the residency," her orderly announced as he stood on the door-way. She looked up in surprise.

"Are, nam kaya hai?"

"Prince Pakkasona, the Sagol Hanjaba," came the reply.

Ethel walked over the rugs and skins on the floor whispering to herself, "These Oriental princes are the least formal and that also a prince, that zealot Col. Johnstone noted in the blue book!" To her surprise, she found that the young prince was very decent, his black eyes bespoke of ingenuity. His head nodded a little after a long reflection. The conversation went on quite smoothly. She wondered how he could pick up English so much.

"I hope Your Ladyship is very comfortable in the new homestead!" he said looking at her with a half smile. "Of course, Your Royal Highness the Sagol Hanjaba," she said with a wan smile. "I see some difference between the Senapati and the Sagol Hanjaba although of the same father," she said looking at his eyes scrutinising his reactions. "But how?" he bawled quite surprise. "The Senapati appears tough, the Sagol Hanjaba, nice and effeminate," she said with a smile. Moni Lal Dey, his shanglakpa made a grin at this remark.

The Sagol Hanjaba left the residency bidding "Good-night."

Ethel found that the residency was a green house; her husband, brought pets, monkeys and one small bear, gold finches for her. Spending the long tropical days was a great trouble, especially for the house-wives. Wives of the princes did not pay any visits save the young princesses. Purple bougainvillea sprawling over the roofs and walls added to the charm and a crescent moon-like pool, lotus glistened in the foreground. Ancient peepul trees, mango and jacaranda trees shaded over the garden. Her pets included monkeys, one wee bear and gold finches. "A green house," she said lamentedly "nobody finds warmth and life in such a house."

At her backyard, she fed the gold-finches from her long hands and found little beaks pecking on her palms and on her wedding ring. She felt the mother-hood waking up in her. "Poor little finches, dearie," she said as she gave a smacking kiss and she smoothed her wings softly. At her sight the menagerie whipped its orchestrated voices. Multilingual voices, some whistling and some sounding gibberish sounds. The wee bear snorted at the lumps of jaggery by her side. The red buttocked moneys jumped from one branch of tree to another and they walked on all fours screeching and looked at her with their faces like centenarians. "Aham, old granny, your buttered bread for your old teeth", she said as she wrestled with them. Turning towards the little bear, she said "Now your supper, poor wee bear, wee voice, you wooly wobbly bear with gruff voice. Somebody was at your porridge! Somebody had been sitting in your chair! Somebody lying in your bed, and there she is now!"

After the feed, she went to her bath-room humming a music. "A lady must be worth looking, of course, a delicate task to strike a balance between the princes. But princes are to be treated as

princes and she must cultivate friendship between the royalty and the Agency and between the princes. The 'Victorian goody would no longer hold the key," she said to herself as she dipped herself in the sparkling foams in the bath-tub.

Lieutenant Brackenbury barged in her drawing-room in the afternoon. A lanky, red-whiskered Englishman who was staying at the Lánghabal cantonment turned up late because of his engagements in the border clashes near the international border of China.

"Good afternoon, ma'm, I am Lt. Brackenbury of 44 G.R. and extremely happy to see you," he said as he shook hands with her. Ethel looked at the tall man with surprise saying, "A big surprise to find a white man here in this God-forshaken place!" "Just wonderful to see you visiting us!"

"Indeed, the only white couple in the state!" he said as he threw himself on the chair. He smiled with his sun-tanned face almost covered by brownish axe-shaped side-burns.

"Well, Lt. Brackenbury, how you spend the afternoon here?" she said looking at his face.

"My lady, have polo matches with the princes once or twice a week and lawn tennis with the white officers on Thursdays in the residency," he said quite joyfully "oh nice time here!"

"I see!" she said in total amazement.

"These princes play damned excellent polos," he said.

"And how far is your cantonment?" Ethel said waiting eagerly.

"Just four miles, ma'm, just at your back and call," he replied.

"My lady, have dinners sometime at the cantonment, of course, barrack style!" Lt. Brackenbury said whistling a music.

Das, the head-bearer brought Scotch and soda on a silver plate. Frank joined them and talked about Ethel's Thursday at-home. The band music played the latest waltz music on the tennis ground.

The Sagol Hanjaba's visit to the Grimwoods became more frequent than ever; he studied more closely what the young couple cherished and when he had any piece of important information or any happening worthy of attention, he would don the choicest silk dhoti and turban with a bunch of flowers on it and visited the residency. Even on Sundays he paid visits to the

Grimwoods. Oh, these Oriental princes are so informal, she lamented again and again. He came with Rasa Raj and Moni Lal Dey and his retinues brought leopard skin and two silver coloured tusks. "Thank you very much for the presents, oh quite nice, so much it would cost in the markets of Calcutta," she said. "Just wonderful!"

The Sagol Hanjaba's retinues walked by his side as he got into his palanquin. After his departure, she unrolled the leopard skin and hung on the wall and thought she would send the same to Calcutta. Moonia, on that day was taking a long bath with her hairs washing with home-made hair shampoo, roots of charrot and other herbs. Who told her to make herself nice and pretty with smell of the herbs, she said to herself. Of course, she had her likes and dislikes and nobody could see these trifles but somebody must be wise enough to see her mind! A woman grows like a flower, she mused. The fresh air, a shaft of sunshine and trickles of water and also a woman needs a soothing look, a soft word and a concern for her. But he hated the head-bearer most and Heaven knows why! Did he make some advances to her in her dove-cot! she asked herself.

Or did the wife of the chapprassi, Naobi love her imaginery lover? The two women would squabble over anything and everything over a piece of towel, a broken plate and over the bakshish from the sahibs!

A woman without coquettish eyes is the most lamentable person, she mused as she saw her smoothing her curly hairs in the sunshine. Ethel's green-house had its own charm and life. But the green-house stifled her and she must have some outings with the Senapati. The Lords and counts go on hunting in the forest of Chesire! she said to herself.

Frank, her husband rummaged through the files in his office, and in the afternoon, he returned quite haggard and tired. And he would go on hunting with the Senapati for weeks! A weeklong hunting! Ethel sent her chapprassi to the palace and called the little princesses!

"Frank, princes pay visits for making friends", she said to her husband while she sat on the dining-table.

"For alliance too," Grimwood said.

"Why alliance, my dear!" she said looking at her husband in

wonder.

"The one won't come here when the other is paying visits to us," he said and with a pause he added, "But we are to be friendly with the two!"

"But, Frank, would it be possible?" she said, her blue eyes looking at his, "of course not!"

"That is what the boss briefed me before leaving Shillong," he said in a matter-of-fact tone.

"How many brothers and step-brothers?" she said.

"Perhaps divided into two camps, the Sagol Hanjaba and his own brothers by the same mother and the Yubarajah and the Senapati and all the steps," Grimwood said looking at his wife.

"Frank, has the Senapati any brother?" she said looking in his eyes inquiringly.

"Oh no," he replied, "His Highness, the Sagol Hanjaba, Prince Thambousana, the Shamu Hanjaba, and Prince Gopalsana, the Dolairoi Hanjaba, they have a common mother. Sir Chandrakirti had a dozen Ranis like the Nawabs."

"My God, a dozen wives, concubines like the Nawabs, how they run the family or the state and the family feuds are the main causes of this polygamy, just wonderful, dearie," Ethel almost cried out in a shrill voice.

"The Senapati and his brothers are of different mothers, the Yubarajah and the Senapati are akin to each other, their mothers are sisters according to the family tree, and Prince Angousana and that lissome chap, Jilla who played polo with the turban flying off his head have different mothers," Grimwood said as he busied himself with the fork and knife on the plates.

"Who will succeed the king, Prince Lukhoi, I hope so," she said looking at his face eagerly.

"No, my dear, the Yubarajah!" he bawled out.

"Unlike the English succession!" she said in surprise.

"So it causes the pretenders' battles too frequently," he said,

Her husband's life in the residency was preoccupied with office files at a time when the tension mounted in the various neighbouring states. The sleeping giant woke from his slumber. Man, money and time were wasted in containing China. During

off-hours, she sensed that her husband had indulged in debauchery; he pitched up tents near the bank of the Loktag lake and spent a weeklong on many a duck-shooting. He returned with basketfuls of fowls and geese after a one week or two. On the other hand she languished the Senapati's love in her heart. Almost every Saturday she had had an evening ride with the Senapati during her husband's itinerary. One afternoon she found her heart sinking and she watched at her ayah tidying her room. Her Gurkha orderly was dusting her room.

"What is the missing link," she asked herself, "somebody to talk with in one's language and to understand one's feeling! Even doves talk to each other in their coes". Of course, Lt. Brackenbury will come to the residency on Thursday with his polo teams from the cantonment. The band music will pour out the latest hits from four to six in the evening. The young lieutenant with red whiskers would turn up at three in the afternoon and play banjo with his comic songs as he ran his fingers on the keys. "Half past kissing time and time to kiss again." Her husband played whist with other white officers in the drawing-room.

Lt. Brackenbury left the residency after supper waving his hands "So long, Grimwoods!" On her way to her private room she heard the clatter of washing plates and she heard Moonia saying "Are tum kon ho?" She thought that her ayah had become rancorous but she had to tend her whims also. Moonia fumed and fussed kicking her blankets. After a few minutes, her snoring filled her cote with whizzing sounds. "My ayah has her own obsessions, always recurrent and her needs, a compromise between her ego and her achievement," she said to herself. "She left an old father and one little daughter and herself a divorcee," she said mournfully, "she hates life and curses upon it!"

Morning pre-occupied her feeding the pets, tidying her living-rooms and fumigating the dank and mossy corners of the living-rooms. Her chappassis dusted the rooms from morning to evening and her garden hands dusted the rooms. She whiled away her time picking orleanders, dahlias and roses. The Manipuri red rose she planted sprouted with new buds. Ethel smelt visitors on hearing the buzz of bees and she had premonitions too. Her child friends knew her best. She kept busy with decorating flower vases with rare combinations of shaded colours. Tulips, tulips she cried one day as she rambled among the flowers under the

leafy branches. Her predecessors brought all the flowers from England.

Ethel had white visitors quite often during the winter who stayed in the residency with the Grimwoods for some days or one week. Her husband went duck-shooting with the white officers and spent one day or two on the floating phums. The visiting white officers spent the nights on the phums with pick-up girls who got good bakshishes. Her husband became a victim to easy vices. Quite restless, she rode her horse in the morning when her husband was snoring in his bed. He returned from the duck-shooting late in the night. She cantered her horse with her breeches and white bonnet through the bazaar and on the way she saw Basak, the Bengali merchant accosting her with salaams. She returned the same with pudent smiles. She trotted along the dry beds of the Nambul stream after crossing the old China bridge. Life in a mansion of wattle and thatch gave her a vacant feeling. She rode and rode to get the unexpected and the unknown. Gasping for breaths, she trotted and trotted. She returned towards the residency along the small river and crossed it near Nitaipat. At the residency, her orderly took the bridle from her and she paced towards her room dusting her hand gloves. Her husband had already left his room for the office. To her surprise, she found that all the flowers in the flower vases were scattered by the monkeys. "What happened, Moonia?" she cried standing on the verandah looking at the flowers strewn all over the verandah. "Hell," she cried and she encountered her eyes with the ayah saying "Are dekho, Moonia!"

The ayah stood quite unconcerned. "Hell, who dares to put all my morning's work ruined!" she cried. The monkey sat hunching on the dressing-table looking at the mirror. "My God, that monkey should be caught and put in chains," she shouted in anger. Her orderly rushed to her aid but he stood quite helpless. Moonia, overwhelmed by her inability to look into this stamped his feet on the carpet floor and ransacked her room cursing her lot for coming to this land. Wives of chapprassis made oblique remarks to her tantrums and incensed her more. Moonia shouted at them and she became a new admittant in the residency.

"A lady's drawing-room must always be kept tidy," she said as she rose the chair and walked out of the room. On the way she picked up a rose-cutter and she paced towards the garden humming a music. A glumy day turned out to be a day of happiness. Kundu

brought one letter from the cantonment to have lunch with the young lieutenant and another invitation for tiger-hunting with the Senapati at a village called Keibul Lamjao. She almost jumped with joy at receiving such invitations. How long it would take to go a hunting tigers, indeed a big game, she said with a beaming smile. What a phum, a floating house, I hear so much from the shikaris, she thought as she stood standstill looking at the red roses. Red roses, red roses, she liked the colour of the rose that bloomed in the land. Of course, it was a native rose. Why I cherish the native rose, she mused as she cut the roses for her flower vases. Why I love everything Manipuri, she said to himself.

The syce harnessed all the horses and the Gurkha sepoy were ready for the ride to the cantonment to Langthabal. Grimwood went down the stairs with her. She donned her best with a Flander's cap and a suede jacket. It was only one hour's ride from the residency. Lt. Brackenbury, lanky and towering accosted the couple saying "God afternoon." "Same to you, Lieutenant, a happy, fine afternoon," they said with beaming smiles. The white officers sat around playing whist and Ethel sat down with the young lieutenant who played banjo. His comic song went on.

"Mr. Brackenbury, you play so nice!" she said looking at him.

"Ma'm, how to spend time if there is no battle?" he said.

"Precisely, the empire needs such young men who could burrow in the dug-outs in this God-forshaken jungle," she said in a sedate voice, "but what use, the wastage of youths, the privations of their parents, the warriors have their sweet hearts also!"

"Oh, Ma'm it is one side of the coin!" he said with a grin.

"Or course, the one that lives for the queen bee and the warriors are the worker-bees!" she said humourously "dearie, young lieutenant, it is all for Queen Beectoria!"

The luncheon went on till late night. They went on playing whist and had champagne which she called 'Imperial luncheon.' Amidst barrack jokes and witticism, she had some draughts of champagne and she taught the young lieutenant how to step in waltz. She said one two, one two. "A young lady is a butterfly in a summer afternoon and she could not be netted without wits. But could there be wits on everybody's lips!" the young lieutenant said with a whine. She twirled and danced like a mid summer

night's dream!

At the 44 G.R., Ethel found her mind lifted aloft and she threw off the nostalgic hang-over. She forgot the frets of her ayah and the squabbles among the wives of the chapprassis in her mansion. An irate ayah and a pugilistic wife of a chapprassi! A good house-wife must be a good gardener and must be good enough at embroidery to put her romantic motif, pairs of parrots, peacock dancing, happy sweet dreams, happy and happy whims that haunt a girl!

The Grimwoods left the cantonment braving the cold wind in the night.

"How exciting such big game is! Ushaba, tik hai, is it not your name, a good name, U-sha-ba, I shall never forget it, alright, tell the Senapati that memsahib sends her best compliments to him for sending such an invitation! So thank you, Ushab-a" she said to Ushaba, the Lallup chingba who gave a salaam to her and left the residency riding a horse. Indeed she had never seen the big games. Of course, big games are for the Maharajah, Viceroy, she said to her husband. Grimwood said nothing. India is known as the land of elephant, rope-walking, snake-charmers and big games too! Her husband's life in the Imperial service although just beginning opened to a new vista of a glittering life, the vice royalty, the gold livery-dressed chapprassis, the red carpets and big mansions! Ethel was not of the Victorian morality, with her graceful appearance with bluish eyes added a new colour and also a new story to his career in the Imperial service. She could not shake off the name of the Senapati from her romantic life and her husband's life in the tents and phums on the lake with village girls made her stranged from her husband! "What a phum is, what a tent pegged down on the bank of a lake," she said to herself "spending the night among village girls! Of course, the visiting white officers are sex-hungry!" She slept late at night making assortments of all her travelling kits; she put all the Sheffield cutlery, mugs, plates and sanitary papers. Lipsticks and Eau de Cologne in her Dorothy bag.

"Moonia, Moonia, please don't forget feeds for the gold finches and wee bear," she said to her who looked at her with a lukewarm attitude.

"Do common people hunt tigers? Your Royal Highness?" she said to the Senapati.

"No, memsahib, it is for the Maharajahs and princes or any other state guests of the Maharajah," the Senapati said nodding his head "even a prince without a title or office in his name cannot hunt a tiger," he said in a sedate tone.

The hunting party encamped on a nearby village. The elephants were by the roadside; the mahouts were busy feeding them. Ethel sat on a chair flanked by her husband and the Senapati. Grimwood was quite busy with his hunting rifle and she looked at the Senapati and to her surprise, she found that he had a womaniser's face and the perfect language for the occasion! The Senapati had nine concubines and he was also in romance with Maipaki, the clap-dancer. She was spending her time with the Senapati in his country-house and far-off retreat houses. "The Senapati is a priapus with nine concubines," she said to herself "but why I find so much enchanted by him. I just love him." She felt an indefinable enchantment in her heart and felt herself drawn towards him.

The camping was, indeed on nearby hill overlooking the floating island of phums where the brow antlered deer roam quite freely. The stockade was already made, a dozen satmers sat on the ground with sullen looks piping the bamboo pipes. Within minutes, the tent was furnished with carpets, white cane-chairs, make-shift tables, a drawing-room, one bath-room, dining-room and pantries too.

"How far is the hunting-site", she said to Senapati.

"Your Ladyship, only half an hour's ride," he said tersely.

A hunter has to outwit the man-eater, the Senapati said to Grimwood. He had already sent Kajao and Brajamohon and a few kuts to locate the man-eater. The villagers were sent to construct one machan well-placed on a big tree for the couple to see the tiger-hunting if there was a suitable chance to shoot from a well-placed machan, quite secure from the marauder. But the hoddah elephants had already arrived for the hunting. Hunting nets and satmars, the spearsmen also. A good hunt, all expected. But the recce party did not turn up. Quite restless, the Senapati called his mahout, Bapu who rushed to him. "Bapu, let us ride a little and see all the arrangement and where could the party be? Held up by the tiger or what?" he said, "you see, man-eaters are very elusive. But Kajao and Brajamohan were no novices in hunting tigers."

Ethel saw the Senapati ride the hoddah elephant and turning back he said, "Grimwood sahib, just a few minutes." "Where, Your Royal Highness?" Ethel cried anxiously, "Frank and I am coming over with you." The Senapati waited as the couple mounted two hoddah elephants. "Your Royal Highness, we will follow you to the stockade," she said looking towards the Senapati. "But Grimwood sahib, please come with your hunting rifle!" the Senapati shouted back. The mahouts shouted 'ouds' and 'pads' to the elephants as they moved along the dusty road and the elephants walked swaying and rocking in slow rhythmic movements. Ethel's ride on an elephant was the second time since her visit to this land. She saw leaves fluttering in the evening breeze from the open space around. The breeze came from the flapping of fan-like ears of the elephants along with the buzz of bees on the secreting head of the animal. The elephants moved swaying and rocking through the dense bamboo-thickets. The lapwings chirped sharply following their march in the thickets and as they came out in the open the strange birds also followed their party.

Smell of the afternoon heat and flight of the agitated deer among the scant grass cast a dead silence. The hoddah elephants forced their ways through the thickets again snoring with heavy puffs of breaths. The elephants sounded hellish sounds. The Senapati took a long breath and cocked his rifle as they rode on a narrow land flanked by small bamboo thickets. "Had my private secretary and Kajao encountered the man-eater?" the Senapati said to his mahout, his hand gripping the butt of his rifle with sweat, "but the white couple must be kept at a safe place!" Their safety took the uppermost concern in his mind. Cry of 'pee-wits' and the agitated denizens of the jungle could hint the imminent danger. But dry leaves of bamboos gave an inimitable camouflage to the lurking man-eater. "Sure, the man-eater had escaped from the stockade," the Senapati said to himself, and he looked back at the two hoddah elephants following him. The alarm cry of the lap-wings became shriller and, more persistent, The Senapati told Bapu to slow down the elephant and he rode closely with the other two elephants. Ethel rode in the middle. The elephants moved swaying like terrestrial upheavals sandwiched between the thickets of bamboos and trees.

The night was warm and a half moon hung on the tall pine tree. The Senapati eyed cautiously at every moving objects.

Ethel rode quite captivated by the scene. The safety of the couple took the uppermost concern for the Senapati. Could she smell the danger, he said to himself. The Senapati turned the elephant and rode behind the two hoddah elephants to give a good cover. The elephants moved snorting among the tall grasses. The Senapati's elephant moved quite cautiously, its marble like eyes rolling. The elephant made a sudden low trumpet and beyond a nearby thicket the sound of rustling among the dry leaves of bamboos filled their ears. The Senapati strained his eyes towards the direction of the sound. It was damned sure that the animal was walking on fours behind the leaves of bamboos. The shrewd king of forest crouched again with its paws clutching loose earths. But the small thickets of bamboo upshoots and dry leaves made no seeming difference. A shadowy figure crouching emerged from the thickets with angry snarls and it hurled like a Satan in the air. It pounced upon the nearest elephant which made it suddenly swerve all of a sudden. The springing tiger dragged the mahout's leg from the elephant and his paws struck the poor mahout's head on the soddy earth. The panicky animal suddenly made a backward move and trampled the mahout on the chest and he dropped dead. Grimwood's elephant got frightened and bolted and blocked the Senapati's level of hunting rifle. All happened within seconds. The Senapati wondered why Grimwood failed to shoot the tiger. His elephant too timid to face the onrush of the man-eater ran away from the scene in spite of the mahout's clamour to control the animal with kicks and jabs of goads.

A loud bang came from the Senapati's rifle and the tiger was hit and it jumped with an angry snarl and vanished in the thicket. Grimwood's elephant also disappeared in the darkness. Ethel was clearly thrown out of the hoddah-elephant and to the Senapati's wonder, she was standing on the ground without her rifle. She was almost in a shock. The dead mahout lay at her feet.

"Where is Frank, Your Royal Highness?" Ethel said with imploring eyes.

"He is alright, Your Ladyship!" the Senapati said smoothing her shoulders, "he will come, let us proceed on my hoddah elephant." He knew that a wounded tiger would charge again and he lifted her on the elephant.

"Shall anything happen to my husband?" she said as they rode

on the elephant.

"Memsahib, kuchh nahing honge, thik hai, I will send my mahout, Bapu to look after His Excellency," he said consoling her. The spring breeze rustled among the vast sheets of mustard flowers. "A wounded tiger is the most elusive and dangerous too!" he added as he looked at her face closely. "If the memsahib desires let us stay beneath the machan for a few moments." He pointed to the machan constructed above their head on the forks of branches. A big, spacious machan on the top of the tree.

Reports of fire reached the camp and the party led by Brajamohon and Kajao had a rough time with the man-eater. Rescue of Ethel was beyond one's imagination because it was already dark. Moreover, the tiger was wounded twice, once by Brajamohon and then by the Senapati. The fear was that Grimwood might be swept clean by an over-hanging branch of trees while the elephant ran amuck. But everything depended on the tact of the mahout.

The quarry had a rough time with the recce party. Ethel spent the night with the Senapati on the red carpet-machan. A princely treat!

The wounded tiger was netted by the beaters and the Senapati bagged the trophy.

Indeed it was a mistake to have the ride in and around the place where the tiger was roaming even though there was bamboo stockade. Ethel nearly escaped death in the melee in the thick of the jungle. The recce party had a rough time with the man-eater and perhaps, they had shot the animal who became very ferocious out of sheer hatred of the human beings. Neither, Grimwood nor Ethel had talked about the incident any longer. Both lived together under the same roof and talked to each other only when one needed to talk to one's partner. Another thing which was noteworthy was that the Sagol Hanjaba was not pleased to visit the residency after the incident. He had heard all the story and how the memsahib did spend one night on the machan with the Senapati. She sat on the lounge and mused on all the happenings since her coming to the little state. I can't cold-shoulder the Sagol Hanjaba and no kidding of the younger brother of the ruling Chief. Fretful, jealous and artful, he contrived to seek alliance and friendship of the British residency. Why should he mind other's business? The Senapati is decent and gentleman-

like and no younger princes should ever be jealous of his amorous relationship with a lady and that she happens to be the mistress of the British resident! All smoke, gammon and spinach! The Senapati is a great womaniser. I just wonder why the soldier James Johnstone forbids his presence in the residency! A womaniser, a diplomat and a perfect gentleman and a man who keeps his words! But the Sagol Hanjaba is quite immature, childish, not bold and dashing. A seducer must be like an athlete, bold enough to strike up a well-meaning conversation with the lady whom he intends to love. The Senapati has all these virtues. The Sagol Hanjaba has worn pretty thin after the tiger-hunting and now he starts nursing a grouse on that account. And why he should tread in his brother's shoes.

"Yes, there is warmth emanating from the Senapati," Ethel said softly as she plucked a red rose and looked at the soft colour. "Even a flower has its own charm in its bed. The Senapati has nine concubines and a charm of his own. Indeed, flowers, roses and one heart to pine for another!" she said to himself as she lounged in the garden and saw the cranes waddling on the bank of the scimitar-shaped lake under the tall deodar and mango trees.

Weighed down with a sad thought she threw herself on the garden chair and gasped for breaths. She supported her face on her hand and looked at the motley of shades on the lake. "Is there anything that is not romantic," she said to herself humming a sad music in the gentle breeze, "of course, the Sagol Hanjaba is also in the fray! To tow the two rival princes in the rough weather!" Ethel suddenly remembered the spotted leopard skin that the Sagol Hanjaba brought one afternoon to her and she paced towards her drawing-room where the skin was kept. Trembling her hands she picked up the skin but she found that it was already weather-wasted. She forgot to send the skin to Calcutta! She found herself seized with remorse and cried out "Poor Sagol Hanjaba!" She paced towards her boudoir and picked up a pen and jotted down on the paper. Hope you accompany Frank and me to the hill station of Mombi on official duty. Your acceptance will be highly appreciated Ethel, Residency Bangalow.

She called Kundu and craned her head to deliver the letter to the Sagol Hanjaba. The clerk bowed his head and went to the

stable and rode a horse on the carriage-drive. "It would be a nice treat to the prince, who happens to be the right hand of the Chief," she said. Above the tall deodars and peepul trees in front of her building she saw the flocks of birds flying towards the lake. A single spray shot would down many a fowl!" The full moon dancing on the silvery expanse of the lake and the wild geese talking curtain lectures in their night nests. Gay, gay went the wild birds in the night over the roofs.

She walked towards her husband's office. He was found quite busy and she sat quite anxiously before him. "Am I disturbing you, Frank?" He looked up apologetically and said "Any urgent business?" "Of course not, dearie, the trip to Mombi hill-station!" "Let us invite the other prince!" she said in a soft voice. "Who the other prince?" he said as he rested his back on the chair. "The Sagol Hanjaba, the brother of the Chief," she said with a shudder. "Well, that is also a good suggestion" he replied in a matter-of-fact tone. She gasped for breaths as she turned her face away.

In the afternoon, the head-bearer announced the visit of the Sagol Hanjaba who was attired in his finest silk achkon; Moni Lal Dey and Rasa Raj accompanied him on palanquins. His long pointed sandals tapped grating over the pavement.

"Welcome, Your Royal Highness, the Sagol Hanjaba, good afternoon," she said with a smile.

"Thank you very much for the invitation," the prince said with his eyes down cast.

"After a long time," she said with a poignant laugh glowing her eyes, "had you been visiting me there would have been no trouble to spend the evening time, ghosh. Frank quite busy with the files, very hard to pick up the local language. Please teach him Meiteilon and you could pick a good conversation English in no time."

"Memsahib, alright, it is no problem. We start the lesson anytime," he said with a smile.

"But Your Royal Highness, please join duck-shooting on the Logtak lake next day and join us on the usual landing place at Bishenpur and have your escorts for the journey to Mombi hill station," she said in a voice full of love and kindness.

Moni Lal Dey and his companion sat quite silent on two

chairs. They were in a happy mood to see their master having in better terms with the mistress of the Political Agent.

With hunting guns and paraphernalia of the couple's travelling, makeshift tables, crockery and sanitary papers, the Gurkha sepoys pegged the tents on the bank of the lake. While rowing in a dug-out boat, the Sagol Hanjaba greeted the couple sporting a double-barrel. He appeared very happy, lifted with a joyous mood. Being a capital shot, his dug-out was half-filled with fowls. He said, "Memsahib, quite happy to see you" he said, his mouth reddened with red paan leaves. Sounds of a million birds came over-head and in a minute, they settled on the surface of the lake. He gave a spray shot and the birds flew up in panick in a line and a second shot brought down almost thirty or forty birds. The wounded ducks floated like cotton balls. "So elusive the birds of this lake," she cried out.

Ethel sat in dug-out boat and looked around but the birds slipped away but she heard a strange music. The fisher-women came but out in their dug-out boats and they beat their boat with the oars. The music of 'langthouba' filled the sunny sky. The music enraptured the couple while the girls and young housewives singing "shabigee khutta shanouna pai, shanougee khutta shabina pai." Some girls emerged out of the houses from the floating phums with big nets and bamboo poles singing the song. The young fishermen rowed in their half-sunk boats "Louri chatpi phingang shetpi tadagee nupi iteima." Ethel's boat rowed till the full moon rolled over the rows of silver-oaked lined banks.

"The tour in the hill-station ended with a sour," Ethel said in a fainting voice as she sat near the fireplace in her residency building. Grimwood sat by her side drinking champagne resting his back on the chair and said "A mid-day summer-night's dream was fraught with the Chief of the hill station warning. Stop or we shoot! The wild joy on the placid water of the lake was marred by the hot reception by the hill-chief."

"The Sagol Hanjaba cut a story figure and he even entreated me to retreat from the destination at the eleventh hour," she said as she threw a piece of log inside the fire-place.

"The Chief would be far from convincing without an Ayapurel or any royal officer not below the rank of a major! But to make a

hasty retreat in the face of a hostile host would mean running the gauntlet!" he said as he smoothed her on her shoulders.

"Of course, the grass-hut with pampass was a pied-a-terre and the small party with smooth bores would be spared from over-running if we accede to their terms," she said as the tongue of fire leaped in the chimney, "just Don Quixotic to run uphill but the storm that lashed was quite erratic followed by an enchanting moon on the top of the hills."

"The Sagol Hanjaba cut a sorry figure on that night; while he took a short nap after the hard climb with puffs and blow-ups crawling on fours, his warmclothes,* bag and baggages were washed away by the gushing water. He did lament that the unwary weather made him spend the night without a bedding at the gate of a hostile gate! And he failed to make threat to the Chief of the hill station and even contemplated to pack up and leave the station!" said her husband as he sipped.

On Thursday evening, almost all the white officers arrived at the residency tennis-ground and the Naga band party poured out the western musics. The lanky lieutenant barged into the drawing-room and said "Hello, Good afternoon," "Hello. Brackenbury, come let us have some drink," she said as they sat on the chairs.

"So nice, lieutenant, please don't fail to play tennis on Thursday," she said beaming her eyes, "what would happen if the cantonment moves somewhere!"

"My God, the regiment will move away very soon!" said the young lieutenant. The music in the background sounded but the news stunned her.

"Why, on this earth make you move from the place?" she said, her yes gleaming.

"Tz'u Hsi, Queen Empress is now evicting her tenants from Peking," said the young lieutenant.

"Who is that Queen, Mr. Brackenbury?" said she in a stiffened look.

"The Queen Empress of China;" said the lieutenant "the regiment will move to China or some border areas very shortly, if not now."

Both sat on the chairs quite absorbed in the thought. The music wafted through the tall hedges. Brackenbury sipped the

champagne quietly.

The head-bearer announced the visit of the Sagol Hanjaba. Atomacha, the hospital employee bowed his head as he rode on his palanquin.

Ethel greeted the prince saying "Your Royal Highness, Good afternoon, welcome to a bangalow, we are waiting you quite anxiously and she ushered him in the waiting-room. The young lieutenant had already left for the tennis-ground. The head-bearer brought a silver plate with fruits.

"Your Royal Highness, any dry fruits, kismish or oranges or any other serbats?" she said looking at the young prince.

"Thank you very much, memsahib, very kind of you," he said with a smile.

"Well, Your Royal Highness, everything is quite fine in the palace and His Highness, I hope, is quite fine with the grace of the Lord," she said in a soft and lingering voice, "and Your Royal Highness, you see Mr Trotter's monument lying in his remembrances and so ended the lives of British residents in the far-off realms of the Queen!"

"Memsahib, Major Sahib, good to us and to the Maharajah also. He died of wounds in action!" the Sagol Hanjaba said in a sedate mood.

Grimwood joined them later saying "My dear friend, how long have you been here? Hope everything is fine!" "Fine, Agent sahib," said the prince. Dabbing his face with a thick towel, he said "Excuse me!" and left the drawing-room. Within a few minutes, he returned to the drawing-room and sat opposite the prince. "So let us start the lessons," he said with a smile "and Moni Lal Dey, your secretary will be here listening to our lessons, Okay?"

The Sagol Hanjaba left the residency in the evening and on the way, Moni Lal Dey said "Sagol Hanjaba, the sun never sets in the British empire and the residency will be at your back and call when the sarkar is in your favour. The Senapati will spend his time whipping his chestnut horse and on the next day he will commit a crime!"

The Sagol Hanjaba listened to his words quite attentively and said nothing as the palanquin was carried by the porters.

"And, the Sagol Hanjaba, you are the only favourite of Srijut and all the ministers know it quite well. It is a brash that the Senapati entered into the arambai-throw competition and he could hit only five or six on a game of eighteen. It is a pity that he flew into a rage that sent him galloping miles to cool him off. And on his return to his sanggai, he started whipping his own horse! Bah, a prince that he is!" Dey said as he rode on his palanquin.

The Senapati pre-occupied himself with the re-organisation of the royal army and he re-equipped the royal force with latest arms. The British sarkar went on supplying more new rifles replacing the out-dated ones and sending boxes of arms and ammunitions. But to his surprise, Partha, the retired native sepoy slipped silently. He taught drills to the kuts but he went over to the Sagol Hanjaba's party. The Senapati said nothing. But he did not cease to be the drill-master, be it for the Sagol Hanjaba or the palace guards, he said quite softly. Quite recently the Senapati used rosary and he chanted it. Being Saturday, he wore the finest silk achkon and came riding his chestnut horse to the residency. Dismounted near the verandah, the syce took the bridle from him and the head-bearer came out and salaamed the Senapati "Memsahib is in, please come in." He followed the head-bearer into the drawing-room. And he went towards Ethel's room and she was near the bath-room. "Memsahib, the Senapati is visiting," he said. "Okay, Mr. Das, the Senapati may be informed to sit in the room here." The head-bearer looked puzzled and stood for a moment and then he left towards the drawing-room and he stood on the door-way and he looked at the Senapati. "Das, is Grimwood sahib in?" he said looking at his face. "Nahing sa'b, he will return from the cantonment in the evening. He went on an official business. Sa'b, the memsahib says that the Senapati may please sit in her private room, just there and please follow me."

The Senapati rose from his chair and followed Das through the next door. He waited Ethel in her boudoir, his hand counting the rosary. He felt his heart so enraptured with the interior decor of the room which was tidy with thick green carpets, flower vases on mahogany tables, magnolia flowers, red roses, lilies on the table. Her bonnet and leather gloves lay on the dressing table. Her Vandyk's portrait with Grim-wood in wedding dresses was on the wall. All flowers seemed entirely from her garden and the

assortments every inch of the room appeared to be hers own and her room smelled of her flesh and breaths. It had a peculiar charm of its own. The Senapati sniffed the fragrant air inside the room. He suddenly remembered the fragrance of her golden hairs as she lay on his shoulders on the moonlit night on the machan at the jungle of Keibul Lamjao. Whistling a music on her lips, Ethel emerged from the rear door in her bath-gown, her bosoms carelessly bulging out of the flower-embroidered towel. "Oh, Your Royal Highness, good afternoon, let us have a ride now, let me dress up, and any dry fruits!" "Oh no," he said apologetically as he looked at her without shifting his eyes. He sat quite enthralled by her nakedness and ivory white bosoms, without any hesitation she threw her back on the sofa while she dried her hairs. The prince sat quite confused by her side and he said to himself "Oh, Ethel you don't understand what I feel!" She suddenly rose from the sofa and with her back bent she walked inside her dressing-room "Please wait, I dress up in a minute."

Ethel and the Senapati left the residency riding their horses.

Grimwood returned from the cantonment with his escorts and he doffed his dresses one by one. He said nothing but he went washing his hand in the basin. "Memsahib, not yet coming from the evening ride; the Senapati had her company," the head-bearer said quite reluctantly. He caught the inference and he paced towards his room and called Das to bring the champagne and one glass. Taking sips he sat looking at the bright lamp surrounded by moths. Weary and haggard, she returned from the evening ride dusting the gloves as she walked past their husband. Her husband pretended not to look at her. After changing her dresses, she walked outside and sat on the verandah. The native sepoys were quite busy in taking their lunches, some shouting in Hindustani and some in Gurkhali. After a while she sat on the dining-table. Her husband said nothing while they sat by the table.

After the super, Grimwood sat alone playing cards alone. The only sound that was heard in bangalow was from Moonia who fretted over her chores eternally.

The menagerie lost its charm. Ethel was quite happy spending a gay life. Her servants from the nearby village beyond the Nambul river were no more in her garden which had worn quite untidy. A pity sight! All leaves withered and all flower-beds had to be cleared off the dry grasses. The workers had taken French leaves or rest in the residency hospital for treatment of prolapsed livers. She found, to her surprise, that her chapprassis would not demean their red liveries with shiny V. R. inscriptions on the brass-buttons. The Gurkha orderly, short and oblique-eyed would wrestle the wee bear. But the bear had already overgrown its size. Ethel fed the cakes of sugar from her hand and left for the gold-finches which had grown pretty thin. The burly bear rushed all on fours and mauled her and floored her on the ground. Her shirts were torn and as the bear sat upon her. Her orderly rushed to her aid and punched the animal and saved her from tearing into pieces!

"The wee bear now needs a mate and he now deserves to be let off on the hills or in the thick jungles," said Ethel quite lamentedly. On the next day the wee bear was let off on the heights of the hills near Imphal.

In the evening Atomacha, the hospital assistant ran towards the bangalow breathlessly and asked the head-bearer to see Political Agent. He said he was sent by the retinues of the Sagol Hanjaba to inform him of an incident near the Sanjenthong bridge. One British subject was mercilessly assaulted by the prince without any provocation while the young man was walking on the roadside carrying the head of a cow for his sumptuous meal. The prince, quite a religious man suddenly flew in a rage as the blood trickled from the meat fell on his person while he walked by his side. The Senapati beat him mercilessly who fell unconscious on the roadside. A small crowd gathered at the spot but the place being near the sanggai of the Sagol Hanjaba, almost all the retinues of the prince took pity on the injured person and admitted him to the residency hospital. Laxman Prasad treated him and gave him the first aid but the head injury was the most critical. Grimwood was not in the residency but he was visiting to cantonment on that evening. He turned up late in the evening. Atomacha returned without any help. But Moni Lal Dey told the Sagol Hanjaba to inform the Political Agent of the incident, "The Agent sahib won't end the matter here because

the injured young man is a British subject. The prince visited the hospital with all his retinues. It was late when Grimwood returned from the cantonment. He stopped in front of the hospital on seeing the Sagol Hanjaba and he got a first-hand information from the prince. But he left the place on the excuse that the matter might be discussed on the next day.

Later, the Sagol Hanjaba said to the crowd "The matter cannot be hushed up as the Agent sahib got a full knowledge of the incident and moreover, the young man is in a critical condition! If the Lat sahib gets the smell of the whole thing, he will get a sore stomach!"

In the night, the palace was in a conundrum. Everybody loved the Senapati but they said one thing when the Maharani was sitting beside them and they said another when she was away. Her main anxiety was to give the title of the Yubarajah to her son, Prince Lukhoisana. "My only son, Lukhoisana shall be the yubarajah," she said nodding her head "the first son of a Maharajah, as everybody knows, shall be the yubarajah and he shall sit on the gaddi, one day!"

"But, what our uncle Yubarajah would be given and on what gaddi would he sit if I am to sit on the gaddi," said young Lukhoisana quite unexpectedly, "uncle Sagol Hanjaba talks about this quite often!"

"My son's time will come very soon, who could check the growth of the elephant-tusks by hammering with the mangle-hammer!" Premamayee bawled out smoothing his unruly hairs.

"But, Maharani, please think of the will given to us on my father's dying moment!" said the Maharajah with a quivering voice.

"But then, who after Jugindra, the last rebel?" the Maharani cried out in anguish.

The Sagol Hanjaba entered the chamber as usual and he sat on the chair silent and mute. He raised his ears as the tall simul cotton trees near the chamber fluttered leaves in the winter wind. The temple bell pealed and pealed with the sound of music. All bowed their heads on the carpet floor. All sat in silence for some minutes. Premamyee was busy in knitting but her wagging tongue almost began to break the silence. She looked up and saw the Sagol Hanjaba about to say something

and then she was reticent again waiting to listen to him.

"To-day's event, the Senapati's time is almost over," Pakka said breaking the silence, "a most unfortunate case, he has started beating up some man on the road who happened to pass by him to-day."

"What is that? Sagol Hanjaba," Premamayee asked in surprise.

"The Agent sahib has already sent a message to the Chief Commissioner of Assam by telegram despatching a message that the Senapati had cruelly beaten up one unfortunate man and now lying unconscious in the hospital?" Pakka said looking at the Maharajah.

"Is it so, Pakka, what does that mean, Pakka?" the Maharajah said in exasperation.

"Yambung, tomorrow, the Agent sahib will send a letter to you for the Senapati has assaulted a British subject today?" Pakka said with a sullen look. His face showed signs of contortion and insipidity. He wrung his fingers in an incomprehensible way.

"We, Yambung, didn't tell the Senapati to pummel the British subject!" he said looking at his brother with big staring eyes.

"Of course, it is perfectly true, dear Pakka, but don't burn your fingers on the issue. Time is the best judge and so too Lord Govinda," the Maharajah said with his eyes almost in tears, "how our departed father and I tried to save the Senapati from the exile to the village of Thanga."

Pakka sat downcast with his face in a reddish colour. His eyebrows puckered in a sullen look.

"Listen to me, Pakka, General Thangal has the final say in the darbar!" the Maharajah said, "he won't do anything to discredit the Senapati."

Pakka hung his face, said nothing and after a few moment, he said, "Dear brother, you are the Maharajah, nobody else!"

"No Sagol Hanjaba, Lord Givinda is above us all," the Maharajah said with his hands clasped in a pranam, "think, the Yubarajah is almost a saint, his heart will be touched at the slightest idea of the Senapati's exile. Pray to Lord Govinda and this will be the only protection from all evils."

The Sagol Hanjaba and bowed his head to the Maharajah and

left the chamber giving a pat on the sleepy head of Prince Lukhoisana. Outside the chamber, the cold wind dashed against his face. He rode off on his black horse towards the Sanjenthong bridge. Partha, the drill-master and Moni Lal Dey followed him behind on the horses who had been waiting the Sagol Hanjaba on the long verandah of the Sebak Chakshang. With jangled nerves, the prince drove his horse in the cold winter wind. And without a word he rode till he reached his sanggai. He threw the bride to his syce and sat on a chair. With a sullen look, he looked through the window and he saw the pale and waning half moon over the Imphal river. The night was calm only occasionally disturbed by the howling of a wind. The hooting of an owl sitting perched on the branch of a tall tree on the river was breaking the weird night. Quite angered by the omnimous cry of the owl he suddenly rose from his chair and looked towards the direction of the sound; he clenched his hands on the window sill and strained his ears towards the sound. "Partha, Partha," he called with a harsh sound, "bring my smooth bore gun."

Partha paced towards the prince inside his room and knelt before him. "Give my gun, Partha with buck-shots," the prince said to him. The drill-master went to the prince's bed-room and took the gun from its stand and he picked up a few buck-shots and he went to the prince and handed over the same to him. The prince took aim in the dark night by hearing the hooting of the owl. With a squinted look, he pulled the trigger with the feather touch of his finger. A loud bang shattered the night. A rustling sound of the falling bird through the leaves of the tree made the prince smack his lips. He said biting his lips. "Hell, the unfortunate night watch, the harbinger of evil omen meets its doom!" He unbolted the gun and threw it to the drill-master.

Mikoi, the wheatish girl with her forelock cut above her black arching eyebrows ushered in Bamon Charan Mukherjee, the royal clerk into the drawing-room of her father. General Thangal rose from the anhic and fell prostrate before the God in the temple. He was attired in old edi silk dhoti and walked with his back bent. The general seemed quite shrunken in his old days but he was active in spite of his old age. "Who calls on me, Mongjamba?" he said to his retinue standing on the courtyard of his residence.

"The royal clerk, Babu Bama Charan," Mongjamba said as he

polished the general's sword, shield and epaulettes in the morning sunshine.

Chanting prayers in his lips the old general traipsed on the paved floor and entered his chamber;

After a few minutes, Mongjamba emerged out of the chamber and he said, "Baboo, now you can meet the general in his reception-room." The clerk rose from the seat and went inside the reception-room. "General sahib, namaste," he said as he bowed his head. The general told him to sit and said, "Baboo, any message from Srijut?"

"Srijut desires to see General sahib," he replied with his hands clasped.

The General made puffs of sweet-scented tobacco and he looked quite blankly. His brown eyes screwed as he puffed and puffed. He said, "Baboo, go and tell Srijut that I am coming. Is it in haste?"

"Of course, general sahib," came the reply.

The old general put on his white silk achkon and turban and rode a palanquin. Thangjaba Chaoba carried the palanquin with his companions, and Mongjamba carried the general's paan casket and a bag and followed the palanquin on foot. The old game of the sarkar was in the offing because the Senapati had roughed up some youth who showed discourtesy to him," the general said to himself, "but to kill a mocking-bird or to net a deer on the Yaral lake is as illusive as the British sarkar!" Then he fell in a reverie and said aloud, "Hell, I stood before Colonel Johnstone defrocked, demoted and I say Colonel sahib, do what an Agent could do to a general." He then clenched his fists and cried out, "Aha, Colonel sahib, you please cut the wrong map with black ink by your own hand so that no more hot arguments may arise again for the settlement of boundary!" he said to himself. "Now the old game of the sarkar to punish the Senapati in his own home, in his own kingdom." With the tobacco pipe in his lips, the smoke went up in hot wind and dissolved in no time.

After the incident, lallups and kuts sat under the trees on either side of the cobbled path and they talked about the roughing of the man near the bridge of Sanjenthong. It was an occurrence which might pass unnoticed in a far-off village or near the town of Imphal. But the unfortunate thing was that it happened near

the palace and it was the Senapati who did the beating! The man lay almost in a coma for the last few days. The injured man happened to be a British subject. The lallups sensed that the British resident would take up the case in no time and they also found that the Agent was waiting time to punish the Senapati for his affairs with his mistress. "This time, the Senapati will have a rough time; the Sagol Hanjaba is now the tutor of the Agent sahib. He is teaching the sahib to speak Meiteilon language for administering the land and as you know, without having a few catch phrases of the language, how can he contact the people? Do you think that Grimwood sahib would give permission to the Senapati to have evening ride almost everyday? They rode as far Porompat or Pheidinga or even the Yaral lake. Many a time, the memsahib and the Senapati were seen sitting in secluded sabans, among the paddy-fields, shooting the snipes on the paddy-fields." One lallup said as he sat leaning on a tree just opposite the Top Garod. "Sure this time, something bad may happen to the Senapati," said another lallup, "but the luck is with him. "Grimwood sahib is also a man of his trade. He leads a debauched life while he went on tours. He used to sleep with village girls. And you won't listen to what the parents of the girls talk about the sahib! The thing is that they cannot approach the Maharajah and tell everything," the lallup said with an angry face.

"Time sees all and time is the record-keeper and could a man escape himself from the current of time!" bawled out old Thangal in a half-grin and half-smile. The empire wore off because the sarkar was too mean, jealous like a step-mother. They could not see any small kingdom prosper and shine in the shadow of benevolence. But a little love and affection is always necessary in any kind of governance. That Col. Johnstone was a bully and he contrived to stifle a small state like Manipur. A darkhast from the Political Agent could move the whole empire! The Agent sahib was a boor who poked his nose in the affairs of this small kingdom. But time sees all, it is the Maharajah's express will that a prince could be exiled and I say nothing and nothing says nothing. Now let nothing speak up!" the old man said sullenly as if in a reverie.

The palace appeared to be in an atmosphere surcharged with tension and belligerency. But the Senapati paid nothing to all the trifling matters and he attended the Top Garod sporting a silver tobacco-pipe while riding on his palanquin. Ushaba bowed as he saw the Senapati came down from the palanquin.

Lt. Brackenbury surprised Ethel in the morning. He came riding in his breeches and had breakfast with the Grimwoods. "When you are free for a lunch, Ma'm?" he said looking at the couple.

"Mr. Brackenbury, any time you fix for lunch, is it not?" said she with a smile. Grimwood smiled but he did not say anything.

"Ma'm, you would have to take a pot luck," chortled the young lieutenant smoothing his side-burns. After the break-fast, he left the residency saying "Please come to lunch at 7.30 p.m. to-day."

The Grimwood left the residency before dusk because they preferred to look at the country-side and the village dames going to the ponds and rivers to fetch water. That was quite happy to have an outing at the cantonment where she could speak in her own language with a few visiting officers. It could drive off the nostalgia in her. The dinner party consisted of many army officers from the far-off areas in Burma. Some played pokers, some whists and other were engaged in gossips of the brewing war with the Queen Empress of China.

"Mr. Brackenbury, why don't tell me that you are posted outside Manipur?" she said to the young man. "I am quite sorry to learn that your posting comes off so soon and we have lost a good friend."

"Not only me, ma'm but also the whole cantonment is leaving this place very shortly," said the young lieutenant.

"Of course, the Chinese doves are making flutters in the dove-cotes." said a white officer sitting next to him, "to hell, to hell, Queen Dowager!"

The dinner-hall of the barrack was filled with the sounds of clanks of forks, knives and clinks of glasses. Ethel found that most of the officers kept themselves busy with the drinks and dinner. At the end of the dinner she said, "Mr Brackenbury, a nice dinner, sticks of ham and corn beef, a nice dinner, just wonderful dinner!"

A trifling incident. Like the thin rope hanging a huge rock over a precipice. Everybody lamented the Senapati's fate. "But what could it be? The tip of the tongue has no bone, and as such all step-brothers, especially, the Sagol Hanjaba never has a good slumber since Tekendrajit, his step-brother became the Senapati," said all the inmates of the palace. The Maharani loved watching the storm lashing the tall trees and lightning striking the distant tall tree. Her mind was quite lifted with joy as the gritty and cold wind dashed against her face. Did she play with the ghosts, some of the Shijas wondered while they shut the windows against the inclement weather. "An iron-willed Maharani" Giridhari said in a flattering voice but he felt awed at her schemes. A lady scheming all the time! Premamayee was waiting the Sagol Hanjaba even during the storm and she saw him almost soaked in rain drops coming with the storm. "What Pakka, I was just waiting you! You could come later or tomorrow," she said in her shrill voice.

The prince sat in her chamber dabbing his face with a towel and he looked at her in a quizzical smile. "So the old case surfaced again, the whole inmates of the palace forget to take their meals on the issue," she said in a slow and dragging voice "Pakka, do you need a char-coal stove to dry your clothes."

"No, dear sister-in-law," said Pakka.

The door was opened from outside and Pitamber stood on the doorway. All looked at the visitor. "My God, Pitamber, why you come in sneaking?" the Maharani said laughing loudly, "come, we are just waiting you."

"The unfortunate thing is that the victim is a British subject and the matter cannot be hushed up quite easily," Pakka said with his lips protruding, "of course, a darbar will be held in a day or two. But the matter cannot end here because Grimwood sahib had already sent a darkhast to the Lat Sahib at Shillong".

"Maharani, who had initiated the matter? The Senapati himself, for pummelling his slaves with fists and sticks!" said Pitamber in a sullen tone.

"Just think over! A stale rice ruining the whole meal," Premamayee said in a drawling voice, "but Srijut's words are final," she said in a sedate voice. "he loves all his brothers alike. General Balaram is already dead and gone. Had he been alive, we could rely on him. He is well-known for his sobriety and saner judgment

and he loves Srijut better than the old Kangaba. Is it not so?"

"Of course, Maharani," Pitamber replied.

"You see Srijut is spending his time almost in prayers and a long litany of prayers. The thakurs and brahmins pray four hours chanting Vedic hymns for the welfare of the people and for Srijut," she said.

All waited in silence but outside the chamber, the strong wind howled and howled relentlessly.

"But Pakka, the Senapati has a large following!" she said with a surprise in her eyes. Both looked at each other with consternation.

"Maharani and dear sister-in-law, could they raise their hands against their own eldest brother," Pakka bawled out popping out his eyes.

"Of course, this is right but shall we forget the history of the kings and the Cheitharol Kumbaba!" she said twirling her thin finger and she turned her back and saw her son, Lukhoisana standing behind her. "Lukhoisana, why are you standing there, you sit on the chair near your brother-in-law, Pitambar but you sit silently and don't interrupt the conversation," she said to her son "you go and sit here."

"But, dear sister-in-law, Srijut knows what would happen tomorrow," the Sagol Hanjaba said looking at the Maharani, "the decision for the Senapati's case would be discussed and Srijut's words would be final."

The sounds of tapping sandals of the carpet-floor were heard and Maharajah Surchandra stood on the doorway saying "Is he not the Sagol Hanjaba? And Pitamber too is here."

Prince Pakka bowed down his head and so too Pitamber. "Yambung," said Pakka "we are having a talk about the darbar."

"Is there anything? Have you heard the Belati officers had killed a cow yesterday and there is a lot of uproar in the town about the killing of the go-mata, mother-cow. And being a sacrilege in a Hindu state, and while I am the head of the state, I have sent one darkhast to the Lat sahib and another to the Agent sahib and the question of the Senapati's exile for such a crime cannot be discussed in the darbar and I shall tell the officer-commanding of the cantonment at Langthabal to send an apology or quit this land!" said the Maharajah with a shaking voice "and

such things shall not happen so long I am the ruler of this little state. And there is another being who is above me. You all won't understand. He is Lord Govinda! I shall never agree with Grimwood sahib on the exile of my own brother, Tekendrajit!" with an angry look he gasped for breaths and left the chamber of the Maharani.

The Queen Dowager of China started driving the bull-like boxers in the China-shops in Peiking. The winter of 1888 brought more wounded and disabled Britishers from the far-off and outlandish countries bordering China. The small number of native soldiers under the white officers left Langthabal cantonment. Ethel sat on the chair in the garden as she watched the war-clouds glide in the eastern sky above the tall deodar and peepul trees. She saw her husband pacing towards her and threw himself by her side on the chair. "What happened Frank, you looked so tired?" she said to her husband looking at his eyes. "Dearie, just now I got a letter that Mr. Heath is going to relieve me and more senior men are coming from furlough?" he said hanging his head. "We count upon being safely installed at Manipur for three years at the least, but alas! Senior men are to be provided with districts before juniors," she said sadly, "of course, I was so happy and took pride in this place during ten months' residence here. Indeed I am very loath to leave this place." She rose from the chair after they were silently sitting on the chairs for a long time. She kissed him softly and she walked round the garden. The winter flowers had already bloomed and she looked at the rose from Calcutta. It took a long time as Heath had to come a long distance from the other side of the valley of Assam. Later it became quite clear that Grimwood was posted to Jorhat.

"Le roi est mort, Vive le roi!" Ethel said to herself as Mr Heath came to join his post. The caparisoned elephants and gold-bridled horses and princes and royal retinues brought him from phoijing and she felt that her time was already over. Ethel almost broke down when she had the last glimpse of her menagerie and she found her gold finches in the cages chirping at her sight. She carried the little birds at the time of her departure. The Senapati and the Sagol Hanjaba escorted the Maharajah at the time of their departure.

"Grimwood Sahib, wish you to see again in Manipur," said the Maharajah with a smile. Ethel was almost tight-lipped and her

moistened eyes had the last glimpse of the Senapati who also said a few words, "Your Ladyship, wish a happy journey!"

With a heavy heart she rode by her husband's side but she never looked back as she rode away. The Senapati looked at her trotting on the road but he found that she rode away with a sad heart. "Sanaton, let us go back, all the princes and ministers had already left! Come and let us move?" old Thangal said in a low and whispering tone "if there is genuine love, she will come back."

Heath, the new Political Agent, lacklustre and almost balding chased the afternoon sunshine like a weather-cock and he walked with a walking stick. "The British resident shows the pale shadow of the Empire," Thangal said bending his head in a whisper to the Senapati. Jilla, who stood by his side overheard the comment and said, "Ipu Thangal our luck will come very soon." The Senapati looked at the young prince in surprise and said, "How, Jilla?"

"The new British resident is a sick cat who cannot even walk with twelve hours' sleep and he walks with his body bending over a walking stick. No actions prejudicial to Yambung Senapati could he taken up!" said Jilla with his starry eyes.

"Ha, ha, Jilla, a nice comment!" Thangal said smiling screwing his eyes. "But don't believe people saying 'The Senapati's darkhast for exile is lying in the steel almirah of the Lat Sahib!'"

All laughed but Kundu came almost running to the palace and broke the news that Mr. Heath expired last night and his body would be cremated in the resdiency. Lt. Berkeley came with flowers and the cross beautifully wrapped in white pompons, red roses and tiny ivies. Kundu put a wreath of gladiola, mums and white pompons.

The Union Jack flew half mast in the morning breeze while the cannon sounded the mourning salute for the white Agent.

CHAPTER — V

A white lady riding on a horse on the road along the palace moat was a common sight, it seemed before the young couple's departure. Now the princes appeared even to have forgotten riding horses. And the prince who was the most unhappy after Ethel's departure was the Senapati and it was said that he did not attend the Top Garod for a few days. What chagrined him most was the diceplays by Sagol Hanjaba and his retinues in the public places. "The Sagol Hanjaba is an inveterate wagerer on dice and pigeon-fighting?" the people used to say. Of course, it was a fashion for all the princes and the sons of ministers and generals to stake on dices and pigeon-fighting. But the younger princes staked all they had, and they squandered all their wives possessed, gold necklaces, silk phaneks, and even paddy from their barns. All the allowances they got from the palace had been squandered and their shijas were afraid of speaking anything against their husbands. Almost all the wives of the princes appealed to the Senapati to check the princes. But now, the old Maharajah was already dead and gone who could say anything to the princes. The shijas or wives of the princes were all adept at weaving muslin-like chadders with gold zharis and such luxurious cloths fetch a high price in the Sanakeithel and they worked drying the starched chaddars in the sunshine and it was only at the time of festivals and social gatherings that the shijas became shijas not elsewhere. And the squandering on dice-plays went on without anybody's notice. But the Sagol Hanjaba's bouts of dice-plays went on an ascending scale and it attracted everybody's notice. This happened after his estrangement from the Senapati. The two princes disagreed on every issue under the sun! After Grimwood's departure, Prince Pakkasana held his head high, riding on an elephant with the shembang-mahum, the swallow's nest. "Only next to the Maharajah," said he to all his retinues who went bragging among his closest retinues.

The Sagol Hanjaba was like one possessed and he acted both in words and actions only digging at the Senapati. He sent his retinues in the morning to the residences of the dice-players and started playing dice near his gate under the big peepul tree. Prince Angousana and young Jilla often went to play dice and it

always ended with an exchange of hot words because they were always fleeced off in the gambling! In the evening the Sagol Hanjaba went to the village mandavs or hall to attend the clapdances and threw away shining silver as bakshishes. His bunch of retainues followed him and they often made a ring around him. Rasa Raj made a round in the centre of the mandav and gave silver coins to the clap-singers. At the end of the song or dance the prince sent the brahmin to the dancer to see the prince who sat watching the dance on a red carpet between two screens. The girls had to sit before the prince talking to her all as young man would like to a young girl. It was an eye-sore to the village youths. Pelting of stones on the roofs of the mandavs was almost not uncommon occurrence!

"A candle burning on both ends," all said. The Sagol Hanjaba's princely allowances from the state coffers did not suit his mounting expenditure. Only the Maharajah or the ministers could take bribes, kwagoks filled with silver coins. But the princes who held the offices of the Sagol Hanjaba could take tips from the export or import of horses. This could make both ends meet. The Maharani secretly advanced money to him. But this was frowned upon by the Maharajah on his wife's requests.

The Sagol Hanjaba's residence became a secret place for dice-plays. The Senapati was given the permission to check the dice-plays and pigeon-fighting. But it was during the life-time of Sir Chandrakirti. The Senapati knew that all the younger princes had squandered all their wealth on dice-plays or pigeon-fightings, "What could I do now, Chaobhal? All the princes have now grown old and they won't pay any heed to my advices. But how long could they continue like this! One evening, Prince Pakkasana went to a clapdance in a mandav; he sat on a red carpet and he piped a silver tipped hokkah. The prince gave money to the clap-dancers without stopping. Prince Jilla also attended the nautch and he also went on offering silver coins. But the Sagol Hanjaba had longer purses and Jilla had to leave the place of dancing in sheer disgust. But amidst the clanks of the small brass-bells, the dancing girls went on singing while the silver coins were offered ceaselessly.

A commotion rose amidst clappings and applauses from the far end of the mandav. The pelting started on the roofs of the hall. The retainues of the Sagol Hanjaba chased the miscreants and

had roughed up the village youths. But they said that it was the retinues of Prince Jillangamba. The nautch ended in a pandemonium. The villagers were tight-lipped because they loved Prince Jilla more than the Sagol Hanjaba. The young prince, not yet entitled to any privileges and allowances by Maharajah Surchandra had to yield but it made his hackles stand up and many a time the two princes were about to hack each other with their swords.

Young Lukhoisana joined the fray. His retinues followed him everywhere and got himself enmeshed up in such frays. Prince Lukhoisana's presence at such frays at his tender age bespoke of the deep animosity among the camps. "A moon-calf, this young prince who starts challenging his uncles," Jilla cried out in disgust.

On the next day, the Sagol Hanjaba's dice plays started in the morning near the Sanjenthong bridge. The Senapati rode on his chestnut horse near the southern gate and he heard the commotion from the clappings and bravos of the players. He bit his lips as he looked watching the gathering from a distance. He said to himself "Sir Chandrakirti gave a special power to me while I was the Kotwal, what is that! Everyone may ask, it is the power to punish any princes found gambling in public houses!" Without looking towards the gathering he trotted along the silver-oaked lined road towards the palace. He looked back in disgust and made some grunts. He tethered his horse near the stable and he walked inside the Top Garod with mincing steps. He saw Chaobhal near the door who bowed his head." Shall all the stuffs be shut off from his master's ears, of course not. But it all depends on the mood of the Senapati," Chaobhal said to himself.

"Sanakhwa, didl you pay a visit to the Sagol Hanjaba," Chaobhal said with starry eyes.

"All came from the groin of Sir Chandrakirti! Seeds of the same father!" said the Senapati with scornful laughs.

The Senapati trotted under the tree-lined road towards the western gate and Chaobhal followed behind his master's chestnut horse.

On the way, the Senapati saw the horse-dealers from Comilla and other cities in the British India. Suleiman bowed his head with a namaste as he said, "Salam aleikum."

"Suleiman, when did you arrive?" the prince shouted to the

horse-dealer as he rode.

"To-day, Senapatiji," Suleiman said.

"Where do you live?" the prince said.

"Sometimes on the Lamphel and sometimes in the market-place, Senapatiji," the horse-dealer replied.

"Suleiman, what breed you bring this time?" the prince said as he drew the bridle.

"Senapatiji, a good many, so to speak!" he replied with a beaming face.

"Alright, alright," the prince said as he sped by, "let me see your things in a day or two."

Suleiman stood looking at the prince as he waved his hands near the market-place. The Senapati and his retinue rode towards the Nambul river.

"Chaobhal, these horse-dealers are coming to this land and you won't understand what they brought for me?" the prince said, "Chaobhal, had I not told you before?"

"No, Senapatiji," came the reply looking at the prince.

"They bring good tidings from the princes and Nawabs who are groaning under the British sarkar and Chaobhal, they also don't like the British sarkar," the Senapati said as he rode.

"Sanakhwa, I learnt that there are many, many big states in the Hindustan, what about Maharajahs and Nawabs?" Chaobhal asked looking in askance.

"Chaobhal, they are vanquished or shot dead," the Senapati said with a shaky voice, "the Hindustan is now under the British rule and no Maharajah or Nawabs raise their heads and you see, the mutiniers are taking shelters in this little state, why you understand?"

"Sanakhwa, I am quite in the darkness," Chaobhal replied looking at his master.

"The fugitive mutiniers think that they could find a leader!" the Senapati said in a peremptory voice, "that is why I wrote long, long letters to princes outside Manipur and I sent them through Suleiman."

Chaobhal looked at the Sanapati in surprise and they rode

towards the residence of Maipakpi. He saw the Senapati reticent again when he was in a serious mood. The dusk came with the majestic colours of the golden clouds flying silently. They rode through the rows of hedges with the hooves of horses breaking the still evening. The Senapati dismounted from his horse and he tethered his horse in the court-yard. Maipakpi greeted the Senapati just near the verandah as she knelt on ground bowing her head. Raising from the ground she placed one chair on the verandah for the Senapati and one mora for his retinue. The young girl went inside her room and made sweet-scented tobacco.

Maipakpi drew out the best yellow colour Moirangphi from the flower-scented phiruk and she put on the chaddar on her as she walked in velvet sandals with the chellam of aroma-seented tobacco in her hand. Putting the chellam in the gold-tipped pipe, she handed over it to the Senapati.

"Maipakpi's tobacco pipe wins wide acclaim in the palace circle and I hope this day's tobacco is, perhaps the best," the Senapati said as he took the pipe from her.

"Sanakhwa, precisely your younger brothers also paid occasional visits to this poor hutment but I have reserved special chellam for the Senapati," she said with a blushing smile, "and those gentlemen who love me say so."

"Of course, it is right, Maipakpi," the Senapati said nodding his head. He raised his head towards her face. He saw her moving her body gracefully like a flower waving in the breeze. She looked at the Senapati and said, "Sanakhwa, only those who love me say so and nobody else."

The Senapati sat puffing the placid smoke of the scented tobacco. She stood encountering her face with a subdued and lingering smile. Chaobhal sat on a mora and pretended to absorb in some stray thought.

"Maipakpi, I come here only to see that you are not in distress because I love you so much," the Senapati said patting his hands on her shoulders, "now you are the richest person!"

"How, Sanakhwa!" she said.

"Maipakpi, you have beauty that has no parallel in this land, beauty is a wealth, my dear," the Senapati said looking at her eyes, "and my youths want to make their house-ladies and their brides. And it is my duty to guard your chastity."

“Sanakhwa,” replied Chaobhal bowing his head.

“She needs a mentor or one who loves her like a sister before her marriage lest you know. Chaobhal, she is a girl in the prime of her life, any son of a minister or a prince may be ensnared by her beauty or by her defenceless, and so I used to visit her in such hours,” the Senapati said in a sedate voice.

He rose from his chair and he said, “Maipakpi, it is time to leave you, and Chaobhal, let us go.” He left the house with Chaobhal on his horse. The moon rose in all its magnificence amidst the sound of music all around, Maipakpi stood leaning on the post of the verandah and looked at the racing moon through the clear March sky. The spring flowers greeted her and she plucked a few and looked at the flower. She put one on her ear. She encountered the flood of moon-light, an evening air wafted with the scent of the jasmine flowers, a lonely heart with no moorings. She gasped for breaths which almost choked her with emotion. A feeling which usually visits a lonely heart. She cursed her fate. She walked for a while on the court-yard and she went inside her house and sat by the fire-side and she drove her slender hand in the embroiders making the plums of peacock beside the artistic letters of ‘sweat dream’. Her eyes moistened as she thought that she had to lead the life of a courtesan. Her love torn between the Senapati and the Sagol Hanjaba! Both had as many wives as they could desire. Could she escape from the hands of the two princes. Of course not, all she could do was to bind herself in a wed-lock with the Senapati. Wherein lies the happiness of a clap-dancer? she asked herself.

Her aunt came and sat near her and said, “Who is the prince who visited you this evening?”

“The Senapati,” she replied in a slow tone.

Next day in the morning, Ushaba sat near the gate at the Top Garod and saw a group of men straggling towards the western gate. He looked at the peasants with a curious look. Some men carried big baskets of sweats, bumpkins and gourd, and bunches of orchids on broad baskets. Chaobhal emerged out of the Top Garod on seeing the long train of men coming in streams inside the palace.

“Ushaba, what is to-day’s work?” Chaobhal said standing near him.

"Chaobhal, perhaps, a tiger rampaging the hills or villages near hills. I could guess from their dresses and head-gears?" Ushaba said

"In a minute we will hear. See they are going to see the Maharajah," he said.

"Perhaps, the mythical white elephant of the Koubru hills!" Ushaba said to Chaobhal.

"Is it the white elephant of the Koubru hills?" Chaobhal asked looking at a middle-aged man walking past the Top Garod.

"Yes, courtiers of the Maharajah, we have left our homes, all crops destroyed by the white elephant, so big and so mysterious," the man said in a shaky voice.

"It is better to fight against a pretender rather than the mythical white elephant of the Koubru," Ushaba said in surprise.

"My God," Chaobhal cried in surprise.

"It brings ruination on the land or if propitiated properly, it will bring prosperity to the land," Ushaba said, "or else, do elephants come with the howling jackals in the day-time and the siren crying in the wilderness and the owls hooting in the broad day-light." Ushaba said looking at the peasants sitting in front of the Top Garod, "Hurry up, Chaobha, in a minute there will be a darbar!"

"Who will hunt the white elephant of the Koubru hills?" Chaobhal said in surprise.

"Don't wag your tongue, Chaobhal, hurry up," Ushaba said as they walked towards the inner hall of the Top Garod.

"My neighbours could not move out of their homes in the night because the haunting call at the dead of night, loud cackles, chuckles and hysterical sobs between the Langol hills and the Lalhambung sent chills down the spines among many," Chaobhal said with his black looking at his companion.

"Hell, the siren cry between the hills;"

"Of course, if such haunting cries come, they say the hills take the forms of maidens and youths and court among themselves," Ushaba said as he bowed his head when the temple bell pealed.

"Of course, they are also like men, they love and do love-making in the darkness of night," Chaobhal said listening to the

sound of the ball.

"Such things are no doubt, omens; for the Gods love young babies and carry them away," the lallup chingba said looking at the thickening crowd around the Top Garod.

"Some thought it was the horses neighing on the marshy land of the Lamphel; these traders from Comilla send their horses to the marshy land for grazing," Chaobhal said very low.

"And who knows the white elephant of the Koubru hills send all the denizens of the forest to the nearby villages and deprive them of their foods; small animals, jackals and hyenas and deer prowl in the nearby jungles in search of food," he said.

"It is, of course the mating season of the wild animals, the elephants also mate," Ushaba said childshly.

"Like man?"

"Of course."

"Where?"

"In the glades or the green knolls;"

"In the darkness of night too," Chaobhal said with a smile, "what about the elephant in captivity?"

"Like Kondumba or Moirangsha, of course, the latter is as intelligent as man and he hides the feeling."

"How do we know?"

"They become unruly when they secret."

"The white elephant and the new Maharajah!"

Chaobhal said, "The Senapati is about to leave by now and in a minute he will be arriving at the Top Garod and I'll rush to his sanggai to help him." Saying this he scuttled towards the Senapati's sanggai.

Within a few minutes, all the princes and generals and ministers came to the Top Garod; and all stood waiting Maharajah Surchandra in front of the Garod.

Tekendrajit came riding on a palanquin with his lotus-like silver hookah and tengnou-like chellam; he puffed and puffed sending placid puffs in the mooning sunshine. All knelt before the Maharajah who came on a palanquin with the usual parasol and retinues carrying swords and shields. Prince Pakkasana

barged into the Garod without looking at the Senapati who walked abreast. General Thangal walked with his back bent behind the Senapati.

The lallups and kuts waited outside the Top Garod; the deliberation went on quite smoothly; old Thangal had his siesta in closed indoors. All princes listened attentively in the gritty spring wind.

"All revered members of the darbar, to-day the elders from the hills of Koubru came with a message that this land is visited by a mysterious white elephant rampaging the peace-loving inhabitants of the villages near the foot of the sacred hill, "Maharajah Surchandra announced in the darbar in a thick-lipped and dragging voice," I would like to say to you all is that—do we hunt the white elephant like other elephants?"

He stopped and looked his eyes around in the darbar hall; his words awoke old Thangal with more surprises and he saw Pakka speaking with his hands bound over his bosom. "Yambung Maharajah, let us hunt this white elephant, we have so many elephants to organise a hunting programme, it is a long time since we have heard of hunting the wild elephants except in tales and camping on the spurs of hills for days and days. But this time, the white elephant is a mystery to us. So I beg your gracious permission to capture the white elephant, Yambung Maharajah."

Old Thangal looked at the young prince quite surprised and then at Senapati Tekendrajit. He tidied his crumpled achkon and rose from his seat and spoke with a grunt, "Chinglen Lanthaba Maharajah Surchandra, the Maharajah is the Vishnu and the Vishnu the Maharajah all knowing and all wise! We all are mortals but the white elephant of the Koubru hills is immortal! The white elephant is a God, immortal and the one that visits at the time of a calamity, it comes only to give a boon or a disaster. No human being could capture the animal. Ningthem, I pray to Srijut, no human beings could dare hunt this animal, it will return to its above on its own will or it will go away after due prayers and due propitiations. The animal is God's own riding elephant. In my long span of years, such visit of the white elephant is no uncommon!"

"All members, we now acquaint with Ipu Thangal's accounts

of the white elephant and what more opinion about the issue," Surchandra said looking at Prince Pakka and then he turned his face towards Senapati Tekendrajit.

Prince Pakka rose from the chair with a jerk and bowing his head, he said, "Yambung, let us hunt this white elephant; it is so strange to us, let us hunt this animal and present to Yambung. If Ipu Thangal says it is the God's riding elephant why should not it be the Maharajah's own riding elephant!" He gulped down and gasped for breaths and he looked towards the Senapati and sat quietly on the chair.

"Ningthem, if ventured to capture such mysterious elephant, the white elephant of the Koubru it will bring loss of prestige to the ruler of the land and to the people of the land," old Thangal said as he gasped for breaths. He stood with quivering legs and said, "Ningthem, we see omens in the broad day-light, howling of the jackals, the hooting of the owls and the meteors darting in the dark passage of the night and I prey to Srijut, instead of capturing the animal let us pray to the God of the Koubru hills, the presiding deity and the white elephant which roams in the wilderness of the blue lofty ranges of the Koubru will go back to its own resting place where no man could dare to visit, O mysterious vehicle of the God. Thou go back to your roosting place for Thy wrath bringeth shame on the land, this land of gold, called Manipur!"

As he sat down on the chair with a thud, his hands wiped the tears running down his wrinkled face and sobbed inaudibly. His nose watered; the Senapati observed all this quite closely and his heart sank and surged. His hands pressed and made a closed fist. His eyes showed a contorted face as he looked down on the floor; he heaved a sigh and tried to hide the feeling so writ large on his face. He raised his hand and shielded his face from the Maharajah and he felt that he could not bear anything that galled the old man since his childhood. Now he was grown up and he could conceal his feelings.

The old man had a dry throat in the spring heat and he gasped for breaths; everybody waited tightlipped and none wanted to say anything on the issue. The Maharajah, quite ignorant of all these looked around and saw Pakka and then at Tekendrajit.

"Dear brother, Senapati Tekendrajit, what is your opinion? We could take the wise counsel of Yubarajah Kullachandra but

he has gone somewhere and will not attend the palace some days," Surchandra said as he looked at him with his bright eyes.

Tekendrajit rose from his seat and ruffled his silk robe in a hurried manner and his face showing a grim determination and said, "Srijut, Thou are wise and all-knowing, the Vishnu, all kings are the Vishnus, Thou knowest all, if Thou are Vishnu, the white elephant of the blue Koubru hill could be Thy vehicle like the Moirangsha; I agree with the Sagol Hanjaba's proposal to hunt the white elephant," Tekendrajit said with his face reddened and his teeth grinding and he looked blank. A rumbling sound filled the room.

Old Thangal looked up at him quite surprised but he said nothing and a few moments later he nodded his head with a grim smile. Thambousana, the Shamu Hanjaba looked at the Senapati quite startled but he could not believe his ears. He knew that the old general and the Senapati never thought quite separate and decided against each other. Of course, he thought that the Maharajah's authority must prevail over the two bulwarks. And the words of the old general lost their charm as the years rolled on.

"Now everybody in the darbar like to hunt the white elephant and Prince Thambou will lead the expedition to the Koubru hills and the number of the troops will be at the disposal of General Thangal who is to accompany the Shamu Hanjaba," said the Maharajah and he left the Top Garod followed by his retinues.

The Senapati sat in the darbar long after the darbar broke; beside him sat the old general with their faces heads touching each other "What is that, Sanaton?" the old man said looking at his eyes closely.

"Ipu, if I back you they will say we are one," cried out the Senapati.

Both laughed like exploding burning bamboos and embraced each other. The old general shed tears out of sheer ecstasy and cried out, "Sanaton, this hunting will bear no good result but I pray the best for Srijut!"

"Ipu, that is all we should pray!" came the reply from the Senapati. He looked back and saw Prince Jilla standing behind them. "Tomba, what is that you came in stealthily and stood

silently watching us, old Ipu and me?" he said. "Come and sit where you think most comfortable."

Jilla sat down after hesitation and hung his face down without a word. Silence followed inside the Top Garod. Ushaba and Laishraba, the Kut came inside the Garod and knelt before the Senapati.

"Well, Laishraba and Ushaba, you should prepare all the arrangements for the hunting of the white elephant which is to take very soon, you see we need making of hoddahs and at the site kheddahs are also to be constructed and not only this stockades and huts for the kuts. Also digging of pits for ensnaring of the elephant. I hope we could capture at least some wild elephants but not the white elephant!" the Senapati said in a slow but peremptory voice.

"Sanakhwa, why hunt the white elephant if we could not capture the animal," Ushaba said in a low voice.

"No, we talk later," came the reply, "but you go and tell all those lallups and kuts to prepare for the hunting and tell Jatra Singh, the Phourungba to issue rice to the kuts," he said.

"Sanakhwa," both said and left the room.

The Senapati turned to Jilla and said, "Tomba, what do you want to say? If you like to say anything, speak up when Ipu Thangal and myself are here"

Thangal said looking at Jilla and patted his shoulders saying "Tomba, one day you'll also go hunting tigers, herds of rock elephants and lead an army to fight a pretender! Of course, I pray to God not to face any pretender!"

Jilla looked at the old man quite quizzically.

"You see, Tomba, when you overpower an enemy on the battle-field, what immense pleasure you get? It is a big game, far bigger than the killing of many tigers. But a time will come; you will get your own princely privileges, princely salaries, your voice in the darbar," the old general said.

"Jilla, do you like to go hunting?" the Senapati asked the young prince.

"No Yambung!" Jilla replied in an agitated voice.

"Of course, a prince when attained majority should be given

all the privileges," Thangal said nodding his head, "Srijut will do all that you need."

The Senapati said nothing but he looked at the royal insignia on the wall and nodded his head quite puzzled. He looked blank again and gasped his breaths having a sigh.

Jilla rose from the chair with a jerk and left the room without a word.

"Tomba," cried the Senapati but he did not turn back, and he turned to Thangal and said, "a prince without any allowance and status is no better than a pauper." "He is the youngest prince and without any privileges for being a prince!"

The moon cast its fairy-like light on rows of iron-sheet roofed buildings at the mango-groves in the fort-palace; the Paonam Hiden appeared with scare shadows of the skeleton branch of the tall simul trees.

The teenaged prince, Jilla almost stayed at the residence of the Senapati inspite of the latter's plea that his frequent visits to his residence would arouse the suspicion of the Maharajah and especially, the Sagol Hanjaba. Could not the princes dine and laugh in my residence at night or daytime on some delicious luncheons, the Senapati said with a smile. The young prince, deeply cherished in wild adventures and reckless duels had bouts of fencing with the subedars and poilas on the parade-ground of the Senapati. He spent almost all the evening practising shooting of the seven-pounders, throw of arambais and other martial arts. Chaobhal and Tonu Subedar did mock-fencing with the young prince but the latter preferred fencing with naked swords and, not with the dummy leather-cushioned swords.

The stillness of the moonlit night was broken off by the muffled blare of band music; everybody ceased fencing and cried, "What happened, has the hunting party arrived with some mishaps!" All raced towards the palace. Jilla jumped on stirrups and galloped towards the western gate under the rows of mango-trees in the moonlight.

"Did the white Koubru elephant really gore the royal elephant to death?" Prince Jilla queried to the old General; the old general rubbed the dusts from his eyes with his hand holding the ends of woollen shawl and said, "Prince, much to tell, I'll tell everything later".

Sounds of sobbing and wailing came from the direction of the palace and the news of the goring of the royal elephant to death by the white elephant of the Koubru hills spread in the palace and its surrounding dwelling-houses. The Maharajah did not rise from where he sat with his forehead resting on his hands. The old general was right to say that the white Koubru elephant was, indeed, God's riding elephant. No human beings could chain its legs in any kheddah and nobody wanted to hear the old man's dotings; Prince Pakka sat in the Maharajah's chamber without a word with his hands clasping his knees and his face hanging low. The capture of almost a dozen wild elephants at the foot of the blue hills of the Koubru was soon forgotten amidst the lamentations of the house-wives and ladies of the Sanakeithel over the death of the astute royal elephant.

After the disgrace of Prince Thambousana, the Shamu Hanjaba who led the hunting of the white elephant of the blue Koubru hills, Prince Pakka and his bunch of attendants were hardly seen. It was an open secret that the royal elephant was gored to death by the secreting elephant, Kondumba. Poor Moirangsha was kept in chains in the moonlight under a tall teak tree but Kondumba was left unchained in the freezing cold winds that howled like the raging waves of the sea. The kuts with numbed fingers warmed themselves sitting around a big camp fire and everybody had not an inkling of the secreting Kondumba set free near the chained Moirangsha, gored the latter with its long tusks; a pity sight, the mammoth elephant crying over its entrails pouring over the shoddy earth and with a heart-rending cry like the thunder it wailed and wailed till blood drained from its huge body dried up.

The Moirangsha, as the Royal chronicle, Cheitharol Kumbaba enters, was gored to death by the mythical white elephant of the blue Koubru hill on that snow-flaked wind howling night. A ruse that saved Thambousana's face! The elephant was cremated on the banks of the Ichai stream with huge piles of dry woods. The Shradha ceremony was held on the thirteenth day in the palace with the Maharajah's Brahman priests chanting Vedic hymns.

Prince Pakka sensed that the astute General Thangal would divulge the secret to Prince Tekendrajit. His words were not worth a little salt. The old general had lost his credulity being past eighty, he became a shadow and lacked in puckish humour.

His conversations was mirthless and his veins as dry as the dry river beds in the wintry season. His alliance with Prince Tekendrajit was already on the rumour circuit through the corridors of zenana mahal in the palace.

Pakka attended the palace with Rasa Raj and Moni Lal Dey with less pomp and grandeur and engaged himself in his official business for a few hours and then left the palace office quite surreptitiously for his residence for the dice play; his followers had already made commotions in his gambling room openly decrying Tekendrajit that he is only fit for banishment from the kingdom. A naughty prince, they made guffaws and yelled with cat-calls. Prince Pakka staked money on the dice on that day and they played pigeon-fighting on the next day with the band musics and they did not end there and they shifted the place of pigeon-fighting on the middle of the wooden bridge over the Imphal river at Sanjenthong. The passers-by finding the road closed on the bridge sneered and said "Prince Pakka is now the ruling Maharajah!"

Rasa Raj and Dey had session of pigeon-fighting on the bridge of Sanjenthong more often than ever and the Sagol Hanjaba presided over the pigeon-fighting. The Wangkhei pigeon-vendors brought the finest game-birds for the day and Prince Pakka sat on a red carpet and a few tens of pigeon gamblers surrounded the prince around the arena. Angousana and Jilla arrived at the scene and they also staked money. The game became quite exciting because Pakka had silver coins at mere asking from his brother Surchandra. But could Angousana stake silver coins like Pakka? With his paan-stained lips he stood staking money on his pigeons and found that his ash-grey pigeon flapped its wings on the wooden floor of the bridge and lay on its back with blood pouring from its cut head. The bystanders shouted and yelled and the band music blared for Pakka's pigeon, jumped to its bleeding feet and stood pecking at Angousana's dead pigeon. Angousana's attendant took out a brickish colour pigeon on the arena and it cooed nervously and ran around the ring beating its glossy wings. More money was staked by the Prince but the fickle chance did not favour him because Pakka's pigeon pecked and speared his pigeon. Jilla threw out shining silver coins on the arena; the music started for Pakka won the game. Quite disappointed, Angousana and Jilla brought out more game birds till they

were fleeced off, and they left the place galloping along the banks of the Imphal river whipping their leather horse-whips.

The afternoon sun made golden ripples on the eddies of the blue water of the Imphal river.

"The Senapati is out on his chestnut horse!" Somebody cried from the crowd. The Wangkhei pigeon-vendors scuttled with their wicker-baskets leaving the place and all the bystanders ran helter and skelter. Tekendrajit horse-whipped the running on-lookers fuming with rage. But Pakka had already left the place.

"The curse of Sir Chandrakirti, God forbid! All princes staking money on the pigeon-fights and throwing away their wives' savings," Tekendrajit whipped with a cracking sound chasing the hapless on-lookers. He looked around looking at the dead pigeon lying in heaps and the silver coins lying in scatters near a string purse, and fuming with rage, the Senapati galloped towards the Southern gate and was seen no more. Pakka saw all this from a key hole in his wall from the residence and said, "See the fun!" Rasa Raj became silent almost trembling his legs and saw Prince Pakka standing at his gate looking at the whole scene. Rasa Raj stood on the other side of the road looking at the scattered pigeons and string purses while Moni Lal Dey walked slowly towards Prince Pakka. All the bystanders had already left the place, some whipped on the back and some on legs. But Pakka looked at the whole scene with an acrimonious smile and he said to Moni Lal "Why you run from the place and why don't you put up a stiff fight and is it his duty to stop pigeon-fighting? Why all this happened when I just left the place for a few minutes! Just shameful, a prince should interfere me when the Sagol Hanjaba is playing pigeon-fighting? Next time let us play on the Sanjenthong bridge from morning to evening and let no one pass on the bridge," Pakka said as he walked towards his sanggai. "Where are Jilla and Angousana riding now and let us follow them and see what the Senapati could do to us when I am there and now you follow me."

"The princes rode towards the south along the Imphal river, and perhaps, they may be near the Moirangkhong bazaar." Rasa Raj said with a sullen look.

• Prince Pakka jumped on his black horse with his sword dangling

His conversations was mirthless and his veins as dry as the dry river beds in the wintry season. His alliance with Prince Tekendrajit was already on the rumour circuit through the corridors of zenana mahal in the palace.

Pakka attended the palace with Rasa Raj and Moni Lal Dey with less pomp and grandeur and engaged himself in his official business for a few hours and then left the palace office quite surreptitiously for his residence for the dice play; his followers had already made commotions in his gambling room openly decrying Tekendrajit that he is only fit for banishment from the kingdom. A naughty prince, they made guffaws and yelled with cat-calls. Prince Pakka staked money on the dice on that day and they played pigeon-fighting on the next day with the band musics and they did not end there and they shifted the place of pigeon-fighting on the middle of the wooden bridge over the Imphal river at Sanjenthong. The passers-by finding the road closed on the bridge sneered and said "Prince Pakka is now the ruling Maharajah!"

Rasa Raj and Dey had session of pigeon-fighting on the bridge of Sanjenthong more often than ever and the Sagol Hanjaba presided over the pigeon-fighting. The Wangkhei pigeon-vendors brought the finest game-birds for the day and Prince Pakka sat on a red carpet and a few tens of pigeon gamblers surrounded the prince around the arena. Angousana and Jilla arrived at the scene and they also staked money. The game became quite exciting because Pakka had silver coins at mere asking from his brother Surchandra. But could Angousana stake silver coins like Pakka? With his paan-stained lips he stood staking money on his pigeons and found that his ash-grey pigeon flapped its wings on the wooden floor of the bridge and lay on its back with blood pouring from its cut head. The bystanders shouted and yelled and the band music blared for Pakka's pigeon, jumped to its bleeding feet and stood pecking at Angousana's dead pigeon. Angousana's attendant took out a brickish colour pigeon on the arena and it cooed nervously and ran around the ring beating its glossy wings. More money was staked by the Prince but the fickle chance did not favour him because Pakka's pigeon pecked and speared his pigeon. Jilla threw out shining silver coins on the arena; the music started for Pakka won the game. Quite disappointed, Angousana and Jilla brought out more game birds till they

were fleeced off, and they left the place galloping along the banks of the Imphal river whipping their leather horse-whips.

The afternoon sun made golden ripples on the eddies of the blue water of the Imphal river.

"The Senapati is out on his chestnut horse!" Somebody cried from the crowd. The Wangkhei pigeon-vendors scuttled with their wicker-baskets leaving the place and all the bystanders ran helter and skelter. Tekendrajit horse-whipped the running on-lookers fuming with rage. But Pakka had already left the place.

"The curse of Sir Chandrakirti, God forbid! All princes staking money on the pigeon-fights and throwing away their wives' savings," Tekendrajit whipped with a cracking sound chasing the hapless on-lookers. He looked around looking at the dead pigeon lying in heaps and the silver coins lying in scatters near a string purse, and fuming with rage, the Senapati galloped towards the Southern gate and was seen no more. Pakka saw all this from a key hole in his wall from the residence and said, "See the fun!" Rasa Raj became silent almost trembling his legs and saw Prince Pakka standing at his gate looking at the whole scene. Rasa Raj stood on the other side of the road looking at the scattered pigeons and string purses while Moni Lal Dey walked slowly towards Prince Pakka. All the bystanders had already left the place, some whipped on the back and some on legs. But Pakka looked at the whole scene with an acrimonious smile and he said to Moni Lal "Why you run from the place and why don't you put up a stiff fight and is it his duty to stop pigeon-fighting? Why all this happened when I just left the place for a few minutes! Just shameful, a prince should interfere me when the Sagol Hanjaba is playing pigeon-fighting? Next time let us play on the Sanjenthong bridge from morning to evening and let no one pass on the bridge," Pakka said as he walked towards his sanggai. "Where are Jilla and Angousana riding now and let us follow them and see what the Senapati could do to us when I am there and now you follow me."

"The princes rode towards the south along the Imphal river, and perhaps, they may be near the Moirangkhong bazaar." Rasa Raj said with a sullen look.

* Prince Pakka jumped on his black horse with his sword dangling

on his left and all his retinues rode behind him. "Cry havoc," cried he as he galloped along the river towards the market-place. After a few minutes' drive, the Prince saw Jilla and Angousana and their retinues standing at the market-place. They stood around a fish-vendor haggling the prices of fishes. The vendor was bargaining the price of shaireng as his mouth spewed out water. And suddenly they heard the hooves of horses on the dusty road. All stood silently looking at the galloping horses led by Pakka. All the market-goers almost ran from the market-place. The Sagol Hanjaba led the whole lot riding on his black horse and came to the site of the fish vendor. Jilla stood without a word and so too Angousana. "What is the price of the shaireng, he you," Pakka said to the fish-vendor who stood up and said, "Sanakhwa, the basketful costs one thousand sankhais but Sanakhwa, " His eyes hovered around and looked at Jilla and then to Angousana. "What but? Moni Lal collect all the fish and give this," Pakka said as he handed over the purse to him. All looked amazed as Moni collected all the fish and they left the place on their horses. They cried cat-calls as they rode off. Angousana and Jilla looked at them from behind as they sped on the dusty road. They stood frozen on the ground and with reeling heads they supported on the backs of their horses. They looked at each other and stood without a word for a few moments and they walked out of the market-place quite lazily. And they stood on the middle of the road without knowing what to do. It was a long time when they rode towards the palace.

All the market-goers looked at the princes with love and pity. "These princes of different Ranis will sure, cut each other with swords, poor princes they forget the curse of Sir Chandrakirti!"

Angousana and Jilla rode under the western gate; the former retired to his sanggai as he led his horse by the bridle. Haggard and weary-looking he threw himself on his bed without speaking any word but he missed the day-meal on that day! But Jilla was sour to the extreme and he rode towards the Senapati's sanggai, his face as red as cakes of molasses. Shija Angangmacha went near the young prince said, "Jilla where have you been? You look so tired. Have you had your meals?" "Nothing, sister-in-law," he replied with a sullen look, and he lay on the sofa and slept off. When he woke up he found the Senapati sitting by his side. He said nothing but his face was filled with so much stories

to tell. He learnt everything from Chaobhal. "Jilla, wake up. You look so tired. Take your dinner here. I had just arrived from a distant village. The road was so bad and so dusty and just taking my bath, I feel very hungry and let have dinner, come," said the Senapati in a sedate and consoling voice.

While taking dinners. He said "Jilla, being a young man, you must learn how to be patient and not easily carried away by a whim or by some one's hints!"

Jilla said nothing but he munched the rice as his vacant looks showed that he had something to say.

Maipakpi's residence was in the middle of rows of thick hedges. She walked in her cotton slippers. A fatherless child, a maiden of unmatched beauty and a courtesan, she was sinking into the morass of the intrigues in the palace. She was an adept in clapping. Not the song but the singer. Her finest muslin-like chaddar bared her bosoms, with black eyes and tresses of black hairs as black as the raven almost reached her bottoms. She was quite familiar with all the princes save the Sagol Hanjaba. She knew that he had a certain weakness for her and he could meet her in the face. The prince sent Rasa Raj to her house on his behalf. He puffed and puffed chellams of tobacco but later the prince turned up at her residence and he sat on a red carpet. The prince said nothing but he also went on piping the tobacco pipe. The prince looked and looked at her but he left without a word.

Of course, no maiden could resist the visit of princes and bachelors to her house during the evening courting hours. Could she shun all the visitors, especially the Sagol Hanjaba! No, she said but he said nothing but he looked at her face and white feet and her bosoms. She would spend her life as a co-wife but it would allow her to make the right choice. She could not resist the face of the Senapati. He was manly, magnanimous and he would guard her chastity and also from disgrace. The Sagol Hanjaba sent his overtures to her many times through Rasa Raj but she kept silent. When her aunt talked about the matter she left the room quietly.

One evening she sat resting her head on the pillar of her verandah and watched the spring moon rising over the tall silver oak trees. She looked towards the palace and saw it shine in the moonlit night. Her heart throbbed and she said to herself "Oh,

Senapati, Senapati, how I love you!" Tears moistened her cheeks. She gasped for breaths. The sound of the spring dance music filled the night. How unfortunate is the life of a clap-dancer, she said to herself.

The Sagol Hanjaba's retinue, Rasa Raj came to the house of Maipakpi, the clap-dancer and invited her to a clap-dance at the residence of the prince. She said neither yes nor no and she, bathed in charot-root shampoo, sat before a looking glass for putting champakka on her forehead; her teeth like a set of pearls, her face in flawless white skin. Her aunt combed her black hairs white sunshine fell on her nicely carved feet. She said "How beautiful Maipakpi you are, your little white feet like silvery ngaten fish! I do lament that one day you have to leave all these when you die!" She held her thick tufts of hairs and combed and combed gossiping with her.

"But Maipakpi, the two princes of the old Maharajah, the Senapati and the Sagol Hanjaba are often the rivals, they are the most accomplished princes and they possess wealths, status and all the qualities," she said and after a pause she said "which of the two princes you love most?" She suddenly turned her face and said looking at her face "Auntie, I don't know your question and the reply!"

The afternoon sunshine did wonders in her little garden and she humed a music as she walked around her garden. Picking some acacia flowers from a tree browning nearby, she put the gold-like balls on her coiffure and she stood in the middle of the little garden in all her beauty. The afternoon sunshine wrought golden colours on her and on the little garden. The soft sound of hoofs drew her attention and she knew that the visitor was no other than the Senapati. She turned her face towards the direction of the sound and to her surprise, she saw the familiar face of the prince. She almost rushed towards him who dismounted from the chestnut horse and tethered the same near the courtyard. An unknown joy overwhelmed her on seeing the prince and with parted lips she said "Sanakhwa" and knelt before him. The prince smiled saying "An evening ride, and would you not come with me for an evening ride?" Hastily she put one chair on the verandah and she sat on a mora, basket-seat. "Excuse me, Sanakhwa," said she and went inside the house and after a while she came out of the door with a silver-tipped hokkah and she

held out her hand to the prince. "So smart, Maipakpi," the Senapati said with a smile.

Maipakpi dressed pine-flower scented silk chaddar and phanek from the phiruk and she held up the chaddars near her nose smelling the pleasant smell. On the verandah the prince was piping the sweet-scented tobacco quite placidly. "Maipakpi, are you ready, the colour of your chaddar matches you like a shija, and how beautiful you are!" he said as he walked towards the horse. Her aunt came out of the house and looked at the scene. She looked at her behind the rows of bamboos and over-spreading branches of peepul trees. "But shall she return in time for the clap-dance," she said to herself.

Evening came; her aunt sat waiting her sitting on the verandah piping a tobacco-pipe. "What would happen to her if she does not turn up in time at the chap-dance," she said to herself.

Rasa Raj came riding a horse and shouted from the other end of the courtyard, "Maipakpi, are you going to the sanggai but please don't fail. If you fail not only you, I also shall be in trouble!" But on the way he met her riding on the Senapati's horse. The time was already late for the clap-dance.

The Senapati dropped her near her gate and rode away. She walked towards the verandah and she saw her aunt almost upset. "What to do this day, Maipakpi, how you forget to dance at the Sagol Hanjaba's sanggai?" she said in an alarming voice. "But if you don't find time why you accept the invitation?" If there are other clap-dancers, it is well and good but if you are the only dancers, it is well and good but if you are the only dancer we shall be in a trouble."

She almost ran towards her little room and doffed her dress for the clap-song and putting a new champaka on her forehead, she picked up the shining brass bells and hastened towards the gate. Riding with the Senapati made her forget everything, No, no, no she said to herself swaying her head. Could she incur the anger of the Sagol Hanjaba! She almost raced towards the Sagol Hanjaba's sanggai and before her oil-lights glittered like the glow-worms on a dark summer-night. Torn between the two princes, she was weighed down by the precarious situation. Like a wounded doe she raced on the road. Her aunt followed her behind pumping her heart violently.

As soon as they came to the gate of the prince's sanggai, they

heard the sound of the songs in the residence. Maipakpi saw the prince in his silk achkon holding a bunch of flowers in his hand. Rasa Raj sat hunching near the prince.

"Why is she so late, Rasa Raj?" said the prince in anger "if she was not willing to come here we could give invitations to a hundred clap-dancers."

"Sanakhwa, she was seen riding with the Senapati," said Rasa Raj to the Sagol Hanjaba in a subdued tone.

The prince looked at Rasa Raj quite surprised and he sat on the red carpet transfixed on getting the news that she had slighted his invitation for the dance performance. Feeling disgusted at this he bit his lips and threw away the bunch of flowers. Rasa Raj repented that he was mistaken to tell his master that the clap-dancer rode with the Senapati. He saw the prince agitating with anger.

"Ridiculous, and ridiculous," cried the Sagol Hanjaba and he rose from the seat with a jerk and left the place. Rasa Raj followed him on the courtyard without a word.

The dance stopped abruptly but she lingered on singing with pauses. Her aunt saw her from the corner of the mandav and she said. "Oh, dearie, you also look back!"

At her home she took cold rice but she ate little. Her aunt told her to take a little more to keep her beauty. "Of course, I am like a girl possessed, because the princes had initiated my love and I am torn between two princes? Indeed this is the fate of a clap-dancer, a courtesan, a lonely life I have to live in my old age when all beauty has already left!" she said to herself as she leaned on the pillar of the verandah. She heard the sound of hoofs of horses on the narrow lane near her house in the moonlit night. She peered through the shadows of bamboos and rows of hedges and to her surprise he saw the horses stopped behind the hedges with the turbaned riders. She heard whispers among time. Turbans rose above the hedges and she was overwhelmed with fear and rushed inside her house. She put the latch firmly and she lay on her bed with a thick chaddar on her trunk. She heard tapping of boots on the courtyard and then the tapping were heard on the verandah. She heard the sounds of gigglings. "How long shall I pass lonely nights like this," she said sobbing and she dozed off on her bed.

She heard gentle knocks on her door and then the knocks became harder and harder but she knew that she had put the latch quite firmly and nothing was amiss. She shivered like one caught in a winter storm. The knocks became harder and harder making her almost out of senses. She realised that the strange night visitor would be no other than the Sagol Hanjaba. She tried to call her aunt but her voice failed her. Even a syllable she could not utter. She tried and tried but she failed.

"Maipakpi, it is needless pretending not to listen," the strange voice cried outside the door.

She tightened her phanek and took a long breath and she waited with her teeth grinding with anger and fear. She tried to move her body but she found that something had seized her and she was quite helpless. The still night showed the time of the night. All the spring music had already been over.

The knock went on ceaselessly and she tried and tried to call her aunt or the neighbours. But her voice failed her.

After a lull, the knock came again and there were whispers among the strange visitors. "A prompt reply will bring a better deal, open the door." the strange voice cried in the night.

"Open the door, Maipakpi!" the voice sounded.

She tightened her phanek and waited with clenched fists.

The knock went on ceaselessly while she heard the violent sound standing on the mud floor, her feet freezing. During the pause she heard the subdued whispers and giggles on the courtyard. The knock stopped after a while and a dead silence followed but her ears could not hear anything save the sound of buzzing in her ears. The knock came again quite softly and it seemed as if the intruders felt discouraged by her lack of response. She wanted to wake up and go to her aunt sleeping in the next room. But she could not rise from her bed. She again raised her ears to listen to the voices outside her room. She rose from her bed and sat on the edge of her bed, her face resting on her hand. Looking blank in the dim light in her little room, she thought, "How unfortunate is the life of a young lady, a clap-dancer! Her chastity is always at stake, could she wed a prince who could ride with her! No, never, but a court dancers whose soft body grinded by the courtiers and their sons at random!" she tightened her phanek around her slender waist and waited the ordeal. Later she

slept off as the sound of knocking ceased. But she was in a fit of wakefulness.

She sensed that the latch dropped without any sound and effort and to her surprise, she found that the intruder became more determined and she saw a tall and thin man with his chin covered with a black clothe. The man walked towards her with a smile and she saw her aunt receding in the darkness in the night. She knew that it was a prince but his face was hidden by the black clothe around his chin. He sat on the edge of her cot. He touched her body but she could not resist it. He took her hands in his grips and started pulling his phanek from her body while she tried to ward off the attack. She wondered how the rapist broke open the door and she tried to shout but her voice failed. She struggled with the strange man and she stroke her hands on the face of the man. She slid down the bed and sat quite naked on the ground in a foetal posture. The man rose from her bed and he embraced her. She found that the intruder's breaths rasped like the howling winds of winter. Her ivory bangles broke into pieces and fell on the floor. She could not resist the attack and had to yield.

"But who is this prince?" she said to herself looking at his face, "the Sagol Hanjaba or any other else!" She shrieked a violent cry and she heard the faint voice of knocking on the door. The golden rays of the morning sunshine came inside the room through the window.

"My God," she cried out with cold sweat on her white forehead. "It was the night-mare!" The sight of the horse-riders near her hedge caused the trick.

Shortly after Heath's sudden death, Grimwood became the Political Agent again. The Senapati and almost all the princes accompanied the Yubarajah for his reception of Grimwood at Phoijing. As usual, the Yubarajah should lead the reception team. General Thangal and the Senapati rode along with the Yubarajah. Richly decorated elephants moved like huge mountains. No one spoke on the way.

At Phoijing, Grimwood paced out of the reception-house with a beaming smiles. "Your Royal Highness the Yubarajah, Tekendrajit Bir Singh, the Senapati and Prince Pakka too and old grand-dad Thangal, how glad I am to see you all again," Grimwood said as he shook hands.

"Your Excellency, Lord Govinda has willed that Grimwood sahib should be here for at least for three or four years," the Senapati said while the Yubarajah made a wry grin, quite unexpectedly.

"Grimwood sahib, at least to talk and laugh with us and how happy am I to see you," Thangal said clasping his hands.

"General sahib, how is your health?" Grimwood said with a smile.

"Grimwood sahib, it is the age that matters," said the old man with his eyes screwing up. "Your Excellency, how do you find Manipur this time."

"Just wonderful, General sahib," said Grimwood with a beaming smile, "just extraordinary to see you all this time."

"His Highness sends his best complements to your Excellency", the old general said, "and wish a peaceful administration in this kingdom."

"Oh, sure, sure, General Sahib," Grimwood said with a smile.

"But Your Excellency, what about the Memsahib? When would she join you?" the general said pouting his lips.

On the succeeding morning, Grimwood attended the royal darbar at the palace and everybody in the palace was quite happy to learn that the old Agent had come again. The Sagol Hanjaba paid a courtesy call to the residency. The young prince, unlike his former days looked more reserved and reticent. But he was not unaware of the growing intimacy between the Senapati and Grimwood. The new intimacy had precluded Prince Pakka from paying more frequent visits to the residency and the Agent was quite aware of the imperceptible change of attitude towards him. But the new change brought the chasm wider and wider. Within a short span of time, it became manifest. Woman is a great unifier, the old adage says. Ethel's absence would bring the warring parties on the brink of an all-out clash. A woman could make the slender thread pliable and it would not easily snap. Grimwood repented her absence at such a juncture of stalemate. But a free and frank relation with the Senapati also incurs the displeasure of his boss at Shillong. An Agent sahib could be amenable to the Chief Commissioner's whims. The latter knew the traits of the Senapati like his own palms!

"But who is the ruffian?" Grimwood asked himself with his lips pouting, "the Senapati or the Sagol Hanjaba." "Young Pakka is mean and egoistic but he is bent on humiliating the Senapati. He is younger than the Senapati and he is a habitue of dice and pigeon-fighting. How could a gambler run the state! The Senapati is broadminded, generous and manly and above petty matters, a bitter enemy and a fast friend, a demonic swordsman on the battlefield; he never indulges in gambling. Who is the devil behind all the disorder in this kingdom?"

One evening, Grimwood said to the Senapati, "Your Royal Highness, hope everything is fine this time!"

"Agent sahib, no family quarrel this time! The younger princes will remember Sir Chandrakirti's curse, and if any prince among our brothers raises a finger against the Maharajah, or any other ruling prince, his clan shall perish on this earth! Ha, ha, ha," Tekendrajit said in jaunty airs. He then laughed a hearty laugh showing his broken front-tooth. He was so open-hearted and so friendly with him. They sat in his little but cosy study near his bed-room. The prince said as he looked up and saw Ethel's portrait in his wedding dresses hanging above his head on the wall.

"Friend," Grimwood said clasping the Senapati's hands, "they don't love you, Your Royal Highness. Why you know?"

"Why so, Grimwood sahib?"

"Why, you had robbed the Sagol Hanjaba of the black haired Maipakpi, that daughter of the royal goldsmith whom you introduced to me one evening at a clap-dance," Grimwood said with a hearty laughter.

"But Agent sahib, how do you come to know all this?" the Senapati said looking at the young Agent.

"Friend, we have our own residency intelligence on the private lives of the princes also," Grimwood said trimming his whiskers, "you address me as friend before Ethel joins me sometime in future."

"When, Agent sahib?"

The young Agent nodded his head with a sullen look.

Grimwood spent out-doors camping on the banks of the Logtak lake with the Senapati. They spent quite happy days of their

youths on the phums floating slowly in the direction of the wind. With a glass of champagne, he looked towards the setting sun on the misty hills of the Thanga hills amidst the rhythmic beats of the oars on the flanks of the dug-out boats, and the gigglings of the girls rowing boats with fish nets. Waves lashed on the phums as they moved slowly. So intimate they became that they slept together on the straw-beds while the waves chopped all around.

They spent holidays and week-ends on the lake for days together.

Princes Ombi loved her uncle, Tekendrajit more than any other of her uncles and she spent her time at her uncle's sanggai with Shija Angangmacha gossiping on the lives of the shijas of the princes. They talked about the youngest uncle, Jilla who was keen on getting his own shija. She said, "But our youngest uncle is only a boy who gets no pittance nor any office after the death of the Maharajah!" She saw the Senapati returning from the lake on his chestnut horse with Chaobhal following his master. "Great uncle, where have you been so long?" she said following her uncle. "Oh, dearie, Ombi, I went on the royal duty," the Senapati said striking her head. "But, if you go to the Logtak lake why don't you go with me," she said as she sat by his side.

"Alright, next time, I promise," the Senapati said as he unbuttoned his jacket.

"Uncle, where will you go in the evening, uncle? And if you visit the residency why don't you go with me and some of my friends?" she said looking at his uncle.

"Alright, you go home and dress up at three O'clock but Ombi, mind that you must be very smart and you should speak English so that the Senapati may be proud of you, you understand?" he said with a smile on his face.

"Uncle, I will come with Mikoi and Leiren" she said as she stood looking at her uncle with a jovial smile.

"Alright, Ombi," the Senapati said, patting her shoulders.

The band music sounded on the tennis-ground in the residency compound. Being Thursday, Ethel's 'at-home day' the white

officers came riding on horses from the Langthabal cantonment. Two palanquins under spreading parasols were proceeding along the palace moat; the Senapati on one palanquin and Princess Ombi and Mikoi on the other. The kuts on the western walls of the palace looked at the palanquins quite interestingly. The Senapati dismounted near the stairs from the palanquin and Ombi and Mikoi also followed suit. Das, the head-bearer announced the visit of the Senapati to his master who hastened to receive them on the verandah.

"Jolly nice to see the Princess Ombi, welcome, welcome, and so good evening His Royal Highness Prince Tekendrajit," Grimwood said with a broad smile.

The princess walked on the carpet with patters of leather-sandals. Mikoi walked beside her. The band music on the tennis ground wafted through the garden. "What a pity, the Memsahib is no more in the residency, uncle please ask your friend when she is coming to Manipur," she said biting her tongue apprehending that such silly questions might anger her uncle.

"Princess, memsahib will not come to Manipur," Grimwood said in broken Manipuri. "Now let have some talks here and have some sweatmeats and this time you should take at least some dried fruits. Don't you remember, the memsahib was very angry when you don't take anything here, mind that."

Both withdrew in shame with kerchiefs covering their mouths.

"But princess and Mikoi, let us see the tennis while the music plays the choicest music and come," Grimwood said as they emerged from the reception-room. They walked on the carriage-drive towards the tennis ground.

"Princess Ombi, next day let us have some photographs in the garden, you come with your friend," Grimwood said as they walked.

Weeks rolled on; Princess Ombi and her friends frequented the residency and they took photographs in the residency garden along with some white officers from Langthabal Cantonment. Streaks of golden sunshine cast its bountiful shafts on the garden. She sat on an ornate chair and the field camera clicked on. Lt. Berkeley watched the scene with Grimwood.

The Senapati escorted the princess on her way to the palace

and on the way he saw Rasa Raj and Moni Lal Dey walking on the road along the moat. And they walked upto the southern gate of the residency. Partha, the drill-master came riding on a horse and picked up Rasa Raj on his horse and rode towards the Sanjenthong bridge. While Moni Lal Dey walked along the moat on the southern side.

When Dey reached Prince Pakkasana's sanggai, he saw the young prince shouting with anger. "Where are the other girls? Why the Senapati should allow Princess Ombi and her friends to pose before the camera? He does not realise what they are doing with the photographs? It will bring shame on the Maharajah! The Senapati also knows that the white men are smuggling their photos in the cantonments and outside Manipur, bah, the photographs of a princess and also my sister's photographs are smuggled out of Manipur for distribution among the white officers", Pakka said almost with a sullen look, "this cannot go on!"

Pakka wrung his hands and drew his sword from its scabbard and he jabbed it in the darkness. "Where are the girls who visited the residency?" he shouted in the darkness with white bubbles of water at the corners of his mouth.

Rasa Raj and Partha stood with their hands bound on their breasts. Prince Pakka walked up and down fuming with rage. He said, "People talk about the Agent sahib's life in the residency is fraught with mistrust and his memsahib does not like even to live under the roof and his tour in the countryside are nothing but revelry with the village girls! "And now they have started taking photographs of the princesses! Of the daughters of the general."

Prince Pakka sat on the chair with a jerk and he became silent looking on the crossed swords on the wall and the black rhinoshield with gold tips. His trophies of nine-foot tigress and leopards hanging upside down grinned at the prince. Partha, Rasa Raj and Dey sat on the floor quite exasperated.

"This should be brought to the notice of the Maharajah!" Pakka shouted scratching his hairs quite ill at ease.

Since Prince Pakka's abortive attempt to banish the Senapati he became very cautious in entertaining 'have a go, anyway' with any venture but he was quite aware that his brother, the Maharajah's heart bled for him. Had it not been the English sergeant of the Langthabal cantonment, the Senapati might have been resting

his life in one of the cells of the Dhaka or Hazaribagh jail! But the plot ended in fiasco due to his sheer luck.

Prince Pakka paced to and fro in the room while his retainers sat hunched on their heels. It is quite sure that there would be a clash between the two camps, The Yubarajah leads a sequestered life and he could be silenced any time! He has kuts numbering three hundred, the Senapati two hundred, Prince Angousana eighty and young Jilla sixty, but at the sounding of the five alarm cannon shots twelve thousand kuts and lallups will report for duty at the palace; hell cares!" Pakka said to himself pacing up and down on the carpet floor, "the Yubarajah without the Senapati is no force, no danger, he is a saint, he could be silenced, Prince Jilla is no danger, he is a green horn and only he will nurse a growl in his heart which nobody will listen to and if he raises any finger against the Maharajah, he too shall be banished along with Prince Angousana, the Dolairoi Hanjaba! But why the young ladies of the palace should frequent the residency and stay there for hours posing before the field-cameras in the garden where no outside people pay visits. Will it bring any good results? Any liaison between the Senapati and the Political Agent would imperil the normal life in the palace and the Maharajah would never take a peaceful slumber!"

Partha, the wily retired Native sepoy sat huddled on the edge of a stool listened to his master's harangue smoothing his black whiskers. Moni Lal looked at the prince quite bewildered. He looked at the young prince who drew out his long sword from its scabbard shouting "Come, Partha let us inspect who of the sentries leave their rifles stacking in a corner to play the dice? Come, come. Anything may happen when the sentry has left the post?"

Pakka thumped his boots on the stairs his hand brandishing his sword in the darkness of night. The kuts rushed to their posts on hearing his voice scattering their dices. Partha, Moni Lal and some other kuts followed the young prince who persisted on roaming on the road and in almost all the vital positions in the palace. They walked from the southern gate to the Koutumba gate and then to the Chirai gate and then to the gate at the Top Garod and lastly to the western gate and the armoury and the top khanna. It was late when they retired to their beds.

The copper-coloured sun woke up Pakka from his bed with its

blinding brilliance through the window and he was seized with a premonition that his sanggai was stormed by Borachaoba, the Yaiskullakpa and his mercenaries while he was asleep and his slumber was much disturbed by the rebels. Was the rebel Borachaoba or the Senapati? he questioned himself. It was a nightmare and it was the shadow of shades as usually found in a nightmare. He shouted and jumped from his bed but, to his surprise, he found that the streaks of golden rays pricked his body like millions of needles! A sleepless night he went through and without speaking any words, he donned his dresses and threw himself on the chair and he dozed off again.

The prince suddenly rose from the chair and told his syce to harness his glossy black horse and he rode towards the southern gate. He dismounted from his horse near the fort and tethered his horse near the wall and he traipsed on the sanggai-phamang floor tapping his shoes. On the way he saw Maharani Premamayee who, on seeing him at such a time of morning said, "Prince Pakka, what happened?" The latter said nothing but he walked towards her and stood looking agape. "What is all that?" she asked looking at him. He nodded his head and said "Something that we need discussion!" "What is that, Pakka?" she said as she put down the basketful of flowers, takhellei, white kundos and a tuft of tingthous. "Alright, I am going to the temple and you stay there till I return. Pakka, do you like to say anything." "No, sister-in-law! he replied, "nothing save the story of photographs which are being sold at a price in the cantonment at Langthabal among the native sepoys." "Whose?" she said. "None other than Ombi." he said staring at her eyes quite puzzled.

Prince Pakka looked at the Maharani with stunning eyes and he said, "Dear sister-in-law, Princess Ombi is your own daughter although she was born by one Rani for ten months in her womb. Why is it that the sahibs started photographing her and other girls in awkward and ugly scenes. The Senapati, in his craziness to get the friendship of the British sarkar is bringing humiliations upon the royal family at the expense of my dear sister, Ombi and some other girls, daughters of ministers and generals! What is all this! All Engrez are all honey or all turd with them! Please think of the princess, so tender in age, and please wait no time before scandals rock the palace! Dear sister-in-law, please think over and do whatever you think right."

"Pakka, you wait in my chamber and let us have a secret talk. Just returning from the temple of Lord Govinda," Premamayee said nodding her head, her long ear-rings swinging like pendulums.

Pakka went towards her chamber while she went to the temple.

Col. Shamu, the Luwang Ningthou paid a visit to the Maharani in the evening; dressed in flawless white silk robes he sat on a velvet-covered mora holding one tobacco-pipe in his hand listening to the latter's words.

"Princess Ombi is my own daughter although she was in Rani Thamchet's womb for ten months, and I hope I am responsible for her happiness in her future, a fully grown-up lady, perhaps the most beautiful young girl in the land, and why she should visit the residency when the memsahib is not in the residency ", said Premamayee in her mincing words.

Col. Shamu listened to her words casually while she chanted her words in a highly surcharged emotion. Her insinuations were directed towards Senapati Tekendrajit for his renewed friendship with the Political Agent.

"Maharani," Col. Shamu said with a grunt.

"But, uncle, the British officers in the residency had taken her photographs and not only her but also daughters of generals and ministers! Could I follow my daughter everywhere she goes, no, precisely no!" she said in her sing-song voice.

Col. Shamu puffed the placid sweet smoke from the silver tobacco nodding his head.

"These white officers are cute in general but they rarely injure other people's mind. Maharani, please think over lest we fall on a false step." Col. Shamu said as he puffed the sweat smoke.

The Maharani screwed her eyes and strained towards the colonel saying, "Dear uncle, so many young white officers are visiting the residency and what our daughters talk and laugh with them is beyond our comprehension. Old Purandhar, the Burmese Interpreter dropped in at my chamber one day on an errand from the memsahib, it was the evening, he told me that the new Agent sahib was toying with the young girls and his young newly wed mistress flirting with my brother-in-law, the Senapati."

Col. Shamu nodded his head puffing the pipe. But he himself refrained from making any remark. He looked at the Maharani

who paced up and down in her chamber quite restlessly. She was almost in a nervous break-down and she began to make shrill and cacaphonic sounds as she put down the gold paan casket on the small side-table.

"Colonel, just think over, my God, uncle colonel, let us talk between us when there is none in this room, even I do not like Pakka to listen to this story, please think of young Prince Lukhoisana. He is to sit on the gaddi of the Yubarajah. Reciting the old story when the Maharajah was only a child. This is about the God of the Brinamchandra which was worshipped by Raja Nar Singh while he was the Senapati," Premamayee said holding her neck as if to whisper to the colonel's ears, and she turned back on hearing the foot-steps of Prince Lukhoisana into her chamber.

"Lukhoi, you play outside and let me talk to your grand-dad colonel some secret words," she said to her son who threw himself on the chair holding the toy brass-cannon given by Ethel.

"Mother, one day I will sit on the gaddi of the Yubarajah for it belongs to me being the eldest son of my father who is the present Maharajah," young Lukhoisana said as if he was reciting his nursery rhymes.

"Lukhoi, you keep quite, I tell you," his mother shouted at the young prince.

"No, mother, uncle Pakka always says so that I should be the Yubarajah," he said.

"But who talks about my young son, and his future, only me and even the young prince at his tender age knows his own rights," she said pointing her fingers like one writing on a wall in a tone of cock-a-doodle-doo, "well, I tell the story!"

She moistened her lips and said "The Lord Brinamchandra was wrested by Kumudini, the Raj Mata from Senapati Nar Singh as, according to the tradition Lord Brinamchandra should be in the custody of the yubarajah. Sir Chandrakirti became the yubarajah at a very young age sitting on the gaddi of the yubarajah. But uncle colonel, my young son does not claim the gaddi of the yubarajah like the good old days!"

"Of course, much love was lost between the two brothers at

first," Col. Shamu said in a slow and dragging voice.

"No, uncle colonel, the Raj Mata never took it for granted that Raj Nar Singh might keep his words and so the assassin nearly killed him in the temple of Lord Govinda and the latter never forgot it and refused to allow even a pinch of land for construction of a memorial tomb for Raj Gambhir Singh at the precincts of the mythical palace of the Kangla," she said like a lady having a tete tete sitting over the fence.

The colonel puffed the tobacco pipe as the fire in the chellam cooled down. He rose from the chair while the Maharani called her maid to change the chellam but the colonel left the chamber. Swispering to herself, "Darn those who aspire to thrones, what price robbing of the Lord of Brinamchandra from Senapati. Nar Singh! Dear brother, Nar who is this child sitting on my lap, said Raja Gambhir Singh basking sunshine in the harvest over a sumptuous dinner like two loving brothers. Raja Gambhir Singh's only son, Chandrakirti, Nar said to his brother. 'No, dear brother, you can't give any suitable reply! I give another chance, who is this young child of three on my lap?' 'Yambung's only loving son!' came the reply. No, I give another chance. Yambung, my own son came the reply in a voice surcharged with emotion. Raja Gambhir Singh threw the young crown prince on the lap of his uncle. So went the tradition. Ha, ha, so went the story."

Partha and Moni Lai Dey strolled on the road along the moat lying between the palace and the residency and they sat on the green grass under the peepul tree; they held their heads so closely and were engaged in a secret conversation. The sentry on the western saw them but they did not pay any attention to the two retainers of the Sagol Hanjaba. The afternoon sunshine slid under the tall mango and peepul trees in the residency compound. They saw two palanquins carrying some ladies going in the residency gate. But they could not see who visitors were and they blamed each other for their negligence. They did not see whether the Senapati went inside the residency gate along with the ladies. Who are the girls, they asked each other. But they could say anything. They suddenly rose from the grass and went towards the residency gate and at the gate they were greeted by Atomacha, the hospital assistant. "Well, Atomacha, who are the girls who went on the palanquins inside the residency?" they asked him just in front of the residency hospital.

"Oh, no my dear! But is it a difficult task to do, well, let us go to the residency and see the memsahib. She knows me and will call me by my name, come, come," Atomacha said quite innocently. But the two refused. He took them by their hands and went towards the residency on the carriage-drive. They walked up to the end of the carriage-drive and saw Princess Ombi sitting on the garden on a chair with her friends. Leiren and Mikoi sat beside her. Grimwood was talking to the princess in his broken Manipuri, his face was smiling. Partha was talking to a native havildar near the carriage-drive in Hindustani and he said "Did Senapatiji visit the residency today?" "No," came the reply. "But, how is it that the princess visit the residency alone without a retinue?" "Are, Partha sahib, let the princess visit the residency. Agent sahib is coming to Manipur without his memsahib, what is the harm? Let them pay visits to the residency as much as they can. Senapatij also visits the residency quite often talking, gossiping with the Agent sahib or with the memsahib when she was here" the native havildar said trimming his beards.

Partha and Moni Lal Dey left the residency without going any further hesitation. "Who is that white gentleman sitting on the left side of the Agent sahib?" Moni Lal Dey said looking at him.

"Perhaps, a visitor," came the reply.

"Is the sahib that young lankey Brackenbury?" Dey said.

"No, he has been posted to Kohima," Partha replied.

The news of Grimwood's carousal with the village girls on the floating phums during the winter while hunting the wild geese on the glassy lake went on uninterrupted and he gave the girls bakshish lavishly. He encamped on the bank of the Logtak lake putting up white tents. His head-bearer was busy in fleecing the wild ducks and geese while he rowed the dugout boat amidst the music of the lang-thouba, the sound of oars beating the sides of boats filled the afternoon sky. The young Agent chopped the water by the oar talking to a village dame who said, "Where is Bhilat, sahib?" "Oh, my God beyond four seas," came the reply. "Leishabi, don't you like to go to England, your Bhilayat?" he said smiling at her. "Sahib, how," she asked with a puzzle in her eyes. "Just marry me and then I will go with you," he said with a laughter. "No, no sahib, I am afraid of sailing across the seas," she said laughing with her chin thrusting out.

Grimwood passed his days on the banks of the lake shooting wild birds, rowing dug-out boats and sleeping on the phums. His orderlies said that thier master's making holiday-spree on the lake had no equal with other political agents who had been posted to Manipur.

"The Agent sahib is now a bachelor having no memsahib in the residency," Das, his head-bearer said as he ran the household chore.

The palace was flooded with rumours that Maharajah Surchandra almost swooned in his chamber in a fit of rage when Prince Pakkasana said, "Yambung everybody in almost all the houses in Manipur are laughing at the Maharajah's family that the Agent sahib and the white officers started selling the princesses by circulating their nude pictures in the native sepoys' barracks!"

"Who told you, Pakka?" Surchandra cried out with his eyes jumping out his sockets.

"Everybody in the palace and," Pakka replied with a whimpering sound.

"Pakka, that means you all are concealing it from me alone," Surchandra said in a shaky voice.

"No, Yambung, there is Prince Pakkasana, the Sagol Hanjaba who is ready to save you from the scandal in time," Pakka said.

"My God, the sin that a father bears for his daughters' faults!" he shouted looking at the ceiling quite helplessly, "and who are other girls?"

"Almost all the daughters of the generals", Pakka said abruptly.

"Tell me, Pakka, everything that you are hiding from me," Surchandra said. "who escorts the young girls to the residency, do you do everything without my knowledge?"

"No, yambung, the Senapati does everything and how could I, a mere prince holding the post of Sagol Hanjaba do such a thing which would tarnish the image of the Maharajah!" Pakka said hanging his head.

"And what about the Political Agent?" Surchandra bawled out to the prince.

"Yambung, all I hear is that he is staying with girls on the Loktag lake on phums and he spends the night with girls!" Pakka said.

"Pakka, is it true? My God, I hear such things, curse my day, my God!" he almost shouted "call Grimwood sahib, immediately to my chamber."

Surchandra gasped for breaths and swooned. Pakka ran towards him and supported him. He dabbed the ends of his dhoti in water and dabbed on his forehead. Premamayee rushed inside the chamber crying "What is this, Pakka!"

Maharajah Surchandra was supported to go to his bed and there he took rest for the night. A pain like stabbing knife jabbed at his back neck constantly and he passed the night without even a wink.

"Where is Grimwood Sahib?" he asked in a mumbling tone.

"Yambung, the Agent sahib has not yet returned from the camping-site on the bank of the Logtak," Pakka said in a soft tone.

"Call Baman Charan inside," Surchandra said in a restless voice.

The clerk put the sandals on the paved floor and came almost bending his body and bowed before him.

"Well, Baman, write to the Chief Commissioner, telling him that the absence of memsahib, wife of Mr. Grimwood, the Political Agent has been much felt in the residency and during her absence he has become morally debauched, and, and, and he is leading a life indulged in easy vices and so on and so on," Surchandra said in a shaky voice pointing his fingers to the royal clerk, "but Baman, is it too much you just imagine and put all the decency in the English language. and come again after the draft and let us discuss it with General Thangal and Col. Shamu."

In the evening, the sentries on the western wall saw Grimwood and his hunting party returning from the Logtak lake and this time he had a big catch of wild birds. His escorts carried as many as one dozen basketfuls of wild duck and one brow-antlered deer on a bamboo stretcher. The kuts knew all what happened in the palace and they waited the aftermath of the row between the Maharajah and the Political Agent.

On the next morning, Grimwood came on his horse to call on the Maharajah in his office. They shook hands but the Maharajah put on a sullen look. With a shaky voice, the latter said "Grimwood

sahib, I hope memsahib is fine at Shillong."

"Indeed, His Highness, by the grace of God," Grimwood said.

"But, Grimwood sahib, all I hear about you is not so pleasant," he surprised the Agent.

Grimwood looked at the face of the Maharajah with an astounding surprise, staring eyes. Without a word he looked at him again with much impatience.

"Grimwood sahib, I hope a house-wife tends to all family chores and see all the minutest details in a house," Surchandra said nodding his head with a sullen look.

"His Highness, what is all this?" Grimwood said staring on his face biting his lip.

"Grimwood, the British resident should not go beyond the limits of his jurisdiction instead of throwing a heap of insults to me, the ruler of the land!" Surchandra said in a quivering tone.

"His Highness, I am the Political Agent," he said quite surprised.

"Agent sahib, I know and I am speaking to you as the Maharajah of Manipur," Surchandra said with an admonishing look.

"His Highness, then what!" Grimwood shouted angrily.

"Grimwood sahib, you are not the only Englishman who has been here as Resident. There are Major Trotter and Col. Johnstone and many others. All of them kept girls, if you want them I shall send you some and you can pick out any three you like best but you must keep them honourably in the residency and not running all over the land after women!" Surchandra bawled out.

"His Highness!" Grimwood said in surprise, as he rose the chair, "His Highness's words are most uncomprehending to me. Better mind your business."

"I mind my business, Grimwood sahib, but mind your own!" Surchandra almost shouted in a shaky voice.

Grimwood walked out of the chamber with his boots tapping in anger.

CHAPTER VI

Ethel's return to Manipur during the fall stirred the silent town with its echoes of her misadventure with the Senapati; her heart throbbed at the music of the streams racing over the age-old and mossy massive stones on the river-beds; she rested on the edge of a huge rock on the bank of the stream humming a love-lorn music and the lark mimicked throbbing of her heart; her heart became vibrant with the echoes of the lark; to her the still moonlit sky filled with the music of tiny birds. Was her heart punctuating with the throb of love! Above her rest-house in the champaksoaked vales of Khoupum the larks broke the stillness of the moonlit night. Her tryst with the prince and with the future goaded her to walk restlessly towards the green valley. The white domed palace and the gold-topped temple of Lord Govinda worked like the mirage and she trudged relentlessly along the music chanting streams down the rhododen-dron-lined game-tracks of the Loibee hills.

Could she find love among the glow-worm-lit marshy lands and the cuckoo-chanting vast sea of green tea-gardens of Assam! No, she trudged and trudged. "Is life only a walk on a road with a guiding night star," she mused, "Of course, it is the beginning, the beginning has no end, the beginning and the end, the line became too thin and too illusive." She trudged through the cuckoo-chanting groves of mango, through the vast sheets of tea plants on the champak-soaked game tracts of the Loibee hills. "Shall I say, prince, prince, am I robbing you of love and I will say, prince, forgive me for I need your love!" her heart sounded silently.

Ethel saw the residency and found the garden had worn a new festive look: the yellow roses from Calcutta blossomed with exotic charm on the beds. She wondered at the sudden change of her homes and how she longed to be in Manipur. "Did I have an unfulfilled wish in the land or do I like to go to a place where she left her love with the prince unconsummated?" She asked herself. "Of course, she was the mistress of the viceregal in the land, and was almost the First Lady of the kingdom.

Tekendrajit was the first to call on her at the residency; she was quite run down after the long and tedious journey. "I hope

the journey is quite fine, Memsahib," the prince said with a beaming smile. "Oh, just wonderful, Your Royal Highness, Prince Tekendrajit, the Senapati, just digging the grave undertaking such a long journey among the ravines, the blue ridges of hills and through the sun-drenched hill sides and ah, my God, I reach this residency and see you!" said Ethel peering at his almond-shaped eyes with her hands clasping behind her head resting on the sofa. She wanted to say something with her mouth agape and looked at him, her long eyelashes fanning sucking in the long autumnal air.

Ethel ambled on the verandah with carpets and passed the long afternoon watching the sunshine playing on the surrounding hills and mango-groves.

"Princesses chattering like mag-pies; of them Ombi is the most fully grown and Mikoi who flirted with the young English lieutenant" she said to herself as she waited them on her verandah. With palanquins and slaves, they came down from the carriers with their front forelock cut above their eyebrows. With smiles on their lips they hung around her and threw themselves on the chairs, some sat on the carpet in her room; "Memsahib, a new portrait on the wall, looks so nice," Mikoi said looking at the portrait. "Sahib and me," she said with a subdued smile. They ran around the verandah through the falling creepers.

"Princess, how is your brother, Prince Pakkasana?" she said to Ombi, her head almost touching her head bending over her, "Princess, your body is reeked with smell of flower, and why don't you use perfumes. Eau de Cologne." She rose from her seat and took a perfume from chest. The princess had not the slightest diffidence on visiting the Grimwoods in spite of Pakka's diatribe against the Senapati and her husband. The Senapati was Ombi's idol and she called "Itonshi." Nobody could restrain her feeling and she, with her front locks of glossy hair cut over her eyebrows looked pretty and waving in her careless gaits, she had the youthful verve and charm; of them, Phandeng and Ombi were too young. Mikoi and Leiren were not of royalty. Ombi hung around her uncle and dragged him by his hand crying, "Let us visit the Memsahib, she is quite alone in the residency." Nobody noticed the palanquins carrying the princesses and Mikoi save the attendants of Pakka on that day; rays of the sun drew out the best colours from the womb of the earth and pointed on the

petals of flowers. Rasa Raj and Moni Lal Dey spent the entire evening on the outer wall of the palace facing the residency; they sat hunching with their hands over the eyes scanning the visitors and they walked on the wall laughing and coughing.

"The visit of the Senapati would stop abruptly when the other prince is visiting the residency, Prince Pakkasana, jealous, and mean could not bear the Senapati's popularity among his subjects, and his charismatic face winning everybody's heart," Ethel thought, "the prince is a celebrity even outside the little state of Manipur." She walked on the lounge and caressed the young budding roses on the beds.

"The tension between the princes is broiling," she said as she rambled among the rose-beds, "and the two vie each other for Maipakpi. It is always a fun to watch a girl before her fiancé." Moonia followed her in the garden with a flower basket. A nautch was being held in this residency and Maipakpi danced with the little brass bells, clink-clang and Prince Pakkasana, Prince Thambousana, so and so princes and Prince Jilangamba and Prince Angousana also attended the nautch with their silk dhotis and turbans. The Senapati came on a palangum alone and sat beside Ethel and Pakka sat on the other side within her view. She was on a vantage position to spy the stolen glances of Maipakpi. "Could a girl hide her feeling, oh, no," she thought and she looked at the dancing girl with black long lashes, she put on the thin white muslin and her bosom was white and silky; the gold ornaments, of course were no decoration on her. Her wheatish complexion with the languid songs and pom pom beats of the mridangas were the cynosure of attraction; her stolen glances, she noted with rapt attentions and each glances gave her pains. Prince Pakka was stiff and swollen munching paan in his mouth. The Senapati's face beamed, and shone and looked at Ethel with smiles.

"Ethel, so wise of you, almost a diplomat, to invite the two warring princes, Prince Pakkasana and the Senapati to the dance," Grimwood said to his mistress at the end. "Frank, did you see it?" Ethel said with a puzzle in her eyes. "It is better not to invite the two princes together in future, Prince Pakkasana never spoke nor lifted a smile during the nautch but he looked sullen," she said as she undressed herself for her bed; she looked tired after the nautch.

"Dearie, don't mix with Oriental princes, au grand sérieux!" Grimwood said to his mistress as he gave her kisses bidding good-night, and without a word she went into her bed-room and shut the door with a bang.

"You'll never understand me! it's not misalliance! I'm about to strike a balance between the Senapati and the younger princes, 'tis more political than amorous!" said Ethel as she buried her face under the pillow.

The autumn rain dripped on the thatch-roof ceaselessly.

An invitation to the polo-match between the princes; the Senapati led one team and the other by Prince Pakka; the band music sounded and resounded; the white dhoti-clad spectators came from far and near villages to see the polo; because the polo match was between the two princes, the rivals and spectators staked money on the polo. The royal messengers shouted beating the drums announcing the match on that day. The autumn sky was placid and the cumulus clouds sailed like the white-sailed ships on the open seas.

The band music had already attracted the audience and the spectators went on saying that the match was between two champions; the princes came riding on their horse-backs with finest green velvet zouave jackets and silk turbans with yellow orchids; the band music sounded and resounded in the evening sunshine.

With flourish of the music, the Maharajah arrived at the rostrum with his retinues; the Grimwoods sat by his left side and the game started. Tekendrajit and Pakka led their horses on the centre of the polo-ground and they went towards the rostrum and knelt on the ground before the Maharajah. The ball was thrown with due ceremony. The princes with raised hockey sticks chased the white ball. Ethel looked at the game with her eyebrows raised and she picked up an unheard music and humed the strain and stopped abruptly; her heart throbbed and beamed an unseen light like one's heart at the sight of diamond light; she was quite happy at the idea that the Senapati was invincible and waited to see the game anxiously. Grimwood sat by her left side and looked at her to say something but she was quite absorbed in the match. The Senapati rode on his horse in his favourite polo-dress in green velvet-jacket with gold buttons and salmon pink dhoti. He did a few strokes sending the white ball skimming

across the green lawn; waltz music flowed. The turbans flew in the air as the Senapati did a few of his magic strokes. Ethel's heart flew across the velvety lawn while the crowd roared and roared. Jilla galloped behind the Senapati who carried the ball with his stick. Pakka tried to check the ball by driving against the Senapati's galloping horse but failed. "Ethel", cried Grimwood bending over her but she did not turn her face; the crowd roared and roared. "Ethel," he cried again but she was quite unaware. The Senapati's party scored fifteen goals after the fourth chukker; Chaobhal and Tonu Subedar were quite busy collecting the turbans staked at the polo-match.

The cry became shriller and shriller and signs of agitation among the crowd; the match became uglier and uglier and the Maharajah showed signs of consternation on his face; he could not bear the sight of his brother, Pakka losing the game. And he did loose the match in the first half. The Maharajah looked sideways and looked at the Political Agent who was sitting quite absorbed in the tense moment of the game.

The polo started again; the fall of a pony-rider drew peals of laughter from the crowd and the Senapati led the game with his horse kicking and driving the white ball into the goal. The crowd applauded with thunderous claps throwing their turbans in the sky to the utter chagrin of the retainers of Pakka who biting his lips drove his black horse at the white ball carried by the Senapati's hockey stick. Jilla galloped towards the prince and shouldered him violently. The crowd missed one heartbeat at the sight of Prince Pakkasana rolling over on the ground falling from his speeding horse; he was nearly crushed by the speeding horses riding past him and the prince made a sudden sprint from the track of the galloping horses. A chill went through the crowd. Surchandra arched his eyebrows and his hands gripped the handles of the chair with sweat and groaned inaudibly at the sight. Jilla turned his horse and looked at Pakka but subdued his smile at the sight. Ethel hovered her eyes furtively behind her long lashes and followed her eyes towards the galloping horse of the Senapati who lashed his horse towards the ball racing on the ground; Pakka walked heavily towards his horse bending his back and galloped towards the ball near the goal, and he overtook Jilla who carried the ball on the ground and raising his long stick he hooked the young prince's stick from behind to strike the

young prince on the head whose turban flowed in the autumn breeze. The Senapati who rode by their side stroke the ball with his stick and locked the striking stick of Pakka by his reverse swing and saved the young prince head from the fatal blow. The backward pull threw the assailant from his horse again hurtling in the air. A bloody match, the crowd cried. Pakka's attendants raised their fists quite convulsively and everybody tensed their nerves and waved their hands in clenched fists. The crowd ruffled like the waves in the rough seas.

The Maharajah rose from the raised chair with a jerk and walked away from the rostrum with his retinues. The young British resident bent over his mistress and whispered some words to her ears and left the rostrum. To her, his departure was as imperceptible as his presence by her side in the rostrum. The crowd clapped and roared and shouted.

Towards the end of the match, luck returned to Pakka's team and they scored goals every minute; each goal was followed by the boos and cat-calls from his followers and the match became uglier and uglier. The Senapati's team met an ignominious end from the hands of his adversary. The cat-calls and boos almost drove the Senapati into madness and without a word he rode off in disgust.

The crowd lamented that the match was the last grand polo! Ethel almost broke down and forgot to hide her feeling; her eyes ran white and her mouth agape with short breaths. At last he walked towards her residence almost blind and saw nothing on her way, and in her room she threw herself on the sofa. She took nothing at her dinner save soup, uttered nothing and tried to avoid her eyes from her husband who looked at her quite uncomprehensive. She tried to needle the fleur de Paris embroideries with moistened eyes but she dropped the needle.

"What happened, Ethel?" said Grimwood in his shrill and nasal voice.

"He's defeated " said Ethel in a perceptible broken tone and she rose from the chair and paced towards her bed-room. He looked in surprise and said "Who?" But she did turn her back and slammed the door.

Ethel ran cold during the night and convulsive ravings disturbed her sleep crying, "Mr. Heath, pray, don't come again after the

dinner putting on Satyr's face, I pray, I pray;" she suddenly raised from her bed and looked through the window in the dim moonlit night. "Indeed, Mr. Heath's memorial stone like the Roman God's bearded laughing face is too near her bed-room and visible to her from her bed-room," Grimwood said and he went to the window and drew the heavy laced screen. As dawn broke out, he sent for Lakshman Prasad, the hospital assistant.

Monsoon went with the trails of the vanishing rain-clouds and the sun behind the blue ridges wrought strange shafts of blue and pinkish colours.

"Your Royal Highness," Ethel said looking at his eyes, "Thank you very much for the flowers." She took the flowers from the Senapati when he visited her on her recovery from illness; she embraced the bunch of flowers on her bosom and looked at them and then at his eyes with more boldness and she blinked with a red face.

"This season brought forth the finest lilies, white, blue," she said, "Frank's predecessors had a fine collection of lilies, rhododendrons, magnolia, passion flowers and "

"Memsahib," the Senapati said looking at her.

"Your Royal Highness, 'tis a riddle, quite inexplicable why your maidens and youths are ebriates of colours, so exotic, roses, orchids, their skirts and muslin sheets and robes imitate real colours from flowers. I saw them making an artistic blend of colours on their garments, why is it so, Your Royal Highness?" Ethel said as her eyes met his. The prince groped for a ready answer; he wondered if the white lady invented a question to express her love for the prince in his unguarded moment. Or was it an art to fathom his love for her? Indeed it was an Engrez lady's overture to an Oriental prince!

"Pinkish, yellowish, bluish colours of a maiden's chaddars, the golden colour of orchids wafted in the shawls, butterflies in gold-zhari imprinted on ladies' shawls and the star-spangled poswan of the Ras dance belles all the dames cherish the real colour in life, Your Royal Highness," Ethel said looking at the Senapati with her blue eyes.

"Your Ladyship, we live in immediate relation with Nature, a love for the pristine one, no barrier between the object and the sense!"

"I see, Your Royal Highness," Ethel said, "a beautiful race who love and dream in colours!"

All the princesses busied themselves rowing the dug-out boats on the lake; Ombi and Mikoi rowed in another boat and Leiren with other younger princesses on another boat.

"Don't run against my boat, you lousy Phandeng!" Ombi shouted at the young princess with a frown. "Don't, don't, I tell you. Itonshi will come and spank you, you lousy princess. And what are you doing Leiren, my boat will sink."

Leiren rowed backwards through the white lilies and Ombi cried out, "Memsahib will take you all to task, all lilies planted so beautifully have been felled by your boat." "You curly!"

The Senapati emerged from the drawing-room with the Grimwoods and walked towards the garden in front of the residency; his Gurkha orderly raced towards the garden with two chairs in his hands, and placed them in the middle of the garden; they saw the princesses engaged in throwing the water-lilies to each other. Ethel smiled and moved towards the bank of the lake and watched them frolicking with the lilies. Without any word, she went on a boat and rowed towards smiling at their tussle with water and throwing of lilies; a lily darted towards her boat and settled on her lap; she turned back and laughed at their pranks; Ombisana and Khomdonsana were almost drenched with showers of water from her adversaries but they put up their faces with hilarity.

"Don't giggle, you lousy, sh. she. sh," cried Ombi with a frown. "Itonshi won't allow us to escort us to the residency."

"What, what, Princes Ombi?" cried Ethel.

"My God," shrieked Mikoi as she almost fell into the lake when she warded off the fusillade of lilies flying towards her. Ethel rolled in rollicking laughter at the sight of Princess Khomdonsana with her hairs netted in water weeds and white leaves of lilies, and while restraining the fusillades from the warring parties, she was caught in the fire-line and was thoroughly drenched with water and she, quite helplessly joined the bivouac.

After a-Maying with the princesses and daughters of the Ministers among the lily-sprawled lake, Ethel hastened to end the frolick and she hastened to walk past her husband and Tekendrajit who were having chit-chats on the garden and her crepe-de-chine blouse drenched with water. She was cut to her barest slender figure and she encountered the prince's eyes; both each at each other without any words.

At dusk, the Senapati left the residency with princesses and the general's daughters.

On Thursday, Ethel's at-home party picked up the old strain of the last year; Lt. Berkeley and other white officers dropped in at the residency and played polo matches with the princes on the polo-ground and lawn-tennis in the residency compound while the band music played in the back-drop. Tiger-hunting and duck-shooting occupied her time. "But the bull in the China-house! The Dowager Queen must be tamed like the taming of the shrew, only one wing is left at the Langthabal cantonment." Berkeley said to Ethel as they sipped sherbet after the end of the tennis while he dabbed his face with a thick towel.

Quite surprised, she looked at his eyes and said, "Oh, my God, the only force to safeguard our prestige. Now how much strength is there at the cantonment?"

"What the hell, ma'm, these princelings can't raise even a finger against you or me! No more pretenders this time!" the young lieutenant said waving his head in dissent.

Ethel pressed out a half-smile and half-sobbing, her eyebrows raising in consternation.

The Leitong sanggai lies on the north-western part of the walled palace. It was a good defence for the palace. Meechao Lallup kept himself busy with the distribution of duties among the lallups and not only that he kept the Senapati's sanggai run like a well-oiled clock. He ran the house-hold chores also; he shouted to all the lallups at the Senapati's sanggai that his master had told him that he did not see his chestnut horse in the stable even after bathing the animal in the Imphal "Heikha Chaoba, go

to the syce and confirm whether the horse has been traced," he said shouting at the top of his voice, "we have searched almost all the stables, the Sagol Hanjaba, the Shamu Hanjaba and many other stables." Meechao Lallup said, "I don't believe no rustlers could touch the chestnut horse belonging to the Senapati!"

Heikha Chaoba returned and said, "No trace of the horse as yet."

"Where did he leave the horse?" the lallup said.

"On the bank of the Imphal river near the Paonam Hiden where the horse was seen playing in the morning sunshine drying its body," Chaoba said in an excited tone, "he said the horse ramped and rambled and cantered on the sand of the river towards the Sanjenthong."

Tonu Subedar paced towards the courtyard from the gate and he said, "Meechao Lallup, I have found out one clue." He walked in with sweat on his forehead and he dabbed his forehead with his kerchief. "Bapu and Thotpa were seen riding the horse near the Sanjenthong bridge," he said looking at Chaobhal who was driving his horse through the gate.

"Chaobhal," the subedar shouted and said, "What news about the horse? Could you imagine any rustlers who could lift the Senapati's horse!"

"Subedar, it is as clear as daylight, the horse was lifted by Bapu and Thotpa," Chaobhal said as he dismounted from his horse, "they were seen riding the horse."

"But who are they? Where they live?" the subedar said looking at him in surprise.

"Subedar, they are the retainers of the Sagol Hanjaba and they hail from Lamding village," Chaobhal said as he sat on the ground quite tired.

"But the horse must be brought before the Senapati comes to learn the whole nasty business and in a minute the Senapati will be arriving at the Leitong sanggai and everybody at the sanggai will be in trouble," the subedar said waving his finger to those standing on the courtyard, "but Chaobhal, has our Senapati smelt the loss of his horse?"

"Needless to say, the Senapati was very angry and he won't spare those who were involved in lifting his horse," Chaobhal

said nodding his head in helplessness, "better hasten to Lamding and bring the two rustlers and give them lashes till they vomit blood."

Tonu Subedar and Chaobhal called the kuts and told them to gallop to the village of Lamding and to bring the two culprits to Leitong sanggai along with the horse either by persuasion or by force. The kuts galloped on the road along the palace moat.

"Fancy a little danger!" Chaobhal cried out to the kuts, "if the Senapati catches hold of the two rustlers!"

Tonu Subedar and all those standing on the court-yard of the Senapati laughed at the galloping kuts who almost jumped over the gate and vanished behind the big peepul tree near the gate of the sanggai at the leitong.

Lamding lies at a village which is a good ride from the palace and everybody standing on the courtyard of Leitong residence thought that the two rustlers would be brought under heavy escorts from their villages at night. But the retinues of the Senapati were very thorough in their duties and they won't return to the Leitong residence without the rustlers.

Bapu and Thotpa went through two hours' gruelling by the kuts on the open space in front of the kuts' barrack in the late night. They were forcibly brought on the horse-back by the kuts to the Leitong sanggai. On hearing that the two rustlers were brought to the residence, they were given a summary trial in the open ground while the kuts made a close ring around them; two bamboo poles were brought by one kut and they were tied to the bamboo by ropes and two kuts lifted the rustler by the bamboo and placed over a newly lit fire. Two pronged cane-stick lashed Thotpa as the interrogation went on in the late hours of the night. Lashes were administered with smacking sounds till he vomitted blood and he fell unconscious on the ground. Bapu met the same fate of lashing by the two pronged cane-stick and burning and smoking by fire but they confessed that the horse was given by the Sagol Hanjaba.

"But the horse belongs to the Senapati," all cried laughing.

The kuts threw the two in one corner of the barrack who passed the slender hours of the night quite unconsciously. In the morning, the retinues of the Sagol Hanjaba came with bamboo stretchers and carried the two from the place. Moni Lal Dey and

Partha waited the retainers just outside the gate of the residency with Atomacha and on seeing them Partha told the retainers of the Sagol Hanjaba to admit the two injured men to the residency hospital. All went inside the residency gate.

Within a few minutes, Prince Pakkasana and Rasa Raj came riding on the horses to the hospital.

The Sagol Hanjaba was stunned to find that Bapu and Thotpa were in a critical condition. Their faces were almost blue from beating and smoking by the fire. He hung his face and sat in a room in the hospital waiting the medical treatment. Laxman Prasad was busy in dressing the wounds and giving first aids to the two injured. Rasa Raj stood by the side of the prince quite helpless resting his chin on his fist.

"Rasa Raj, a good idea to admit the two to this hospital and if they succumbed to their injuries during the treatment at the residency hospital it will make a hue and cry in the Political Agent's residence and then the matter cannot be suppressed. Next step, as you know that the exile case of Senapati will surface again!" Pakka said looking at the nurses shuttling between the rooms.

"Maharajah Kumar, one may survive but the condition of another patient is quite uncertain. This is very unfortunate, seems to have been subjected to long hours of smoking by fire and lashing by two pointed sticks, just gruelling hours they had had, who did it?" Laxman Prasad said looking at the prince.

"Doctor, who could he be? Just imagine, just abominable to think about this, just killing one's retainers for a paltry matter," the prince said.

"Rasa Raj, come, let us tell the Agent sahib all what happened last night," Pakka said as he rose from the chair. "His exile case will raise again. It is like encountering a black woolly bear who chases his adversary who hit him leaving his former opponent."

They waited the most opportune moment to lodge a complaint with the Agent; Rasa Raj had the barrack kuts prepared the most relished food for the two injured retainers of the Sagol Hanjaba and sent one kut to the residency hospital, one in the morning and another in the evening. Thotpa had had a few morsels of rice while Bapu slept quite unconsciously for the last two or three days. Indeed his life was quite critical, Laxman Prasad said

to the Sagol Hanjaba in a whispering tone. Bapu's parents had already arrived and they slept in Atomacha's dormitory. Rasa Raj slipped some silver coins in the hands of Bapu's father, a peasant in thick cotton dhoti who spoke nothing save looking sedate for his son's life. The wily attendant of the Sagol Hanjaba coaxed the parents of Bapu and Thotpa to submit a darkhast to the Political Agent against the Senapati for assaulting their sons. In the evening Prince Pakkasana and his retinues visited the residency but neither the Political Agent nor his mistress was in the residency. Das, the head bearer told the Sagol Hanjaba on the stairs that his master and mistress had already left for evening walk.

"Sahib is now at the Langthabal cantonment," the head-bearer said with his head bowing.

"But could we see the memsahib?" the prince said looking at the head-bearer.

"Memsahib has left for an evening ride," came the reply.

"With the Agent sahib?" said the prince.

"No, with the Senapati," came the reply.

The Sagol Hanjaba looked at the head-bearer with a sudden change of colour of his face.

The day being Saturday, Ethel usually had a long evening horse-ride with the Senapati; they trotted on the dusty road of Porompat towards the blue hills of the Nongmaiching. Riding on the sloping banks of the Iril river and through the dry stalks of paddy-fields, Chaobhal followed them on his horse without a word carrying the Senapati's green hilt sword on his side. She listened to the sweet music of birds chirping among the leaves of trees. A sudden cool breeze rose from across the vast sheets of paddyfields and lifted her front lock of golden hair. They rode and rode quite sprightly in the evening sunshine and breeze till they found themselves far away from the town of Imphal.

"Your Royal Highness, how beautiful is this place! Wish I die here, so pretty!" she cried out in an ecstasy. They rode on forgetting everything. She looked at the village dames drawing broad fish-nets on bamboo poles smacking at the lean catch. They looked at the giggling girls and rode off towards the Yaral lake. The small road was lined with the spring flowers. The birds

chirped in unison. On reaching the banks of the lake, reeked of lotus smells. The breeze wafted through the lotus flowers.

They dismounted from their horses and walked along the bank of the lake; the swallows flew across the lake making dives on the lake. Ethel walked hand in hand with the prince without speaking anything. They walked where their passion led and where the evening sunshine shone. She plucked a sheaf of paddy and threw herself on the grass on the bank of the lake. The prince also sat by her sporting the horse-whip in his hand. They spoke no words but they adored each other. Her heart cried, "Oh, prince, oh, prince!" she said nothing looking at his eyes. She rose from the grass suddenly and walked across the dry stalks of paddy and she looked back at the Senapati, and without a word he rose from the grass with a jerk and with big strides he took over her. He turned back and said, "Chaobhal, stay where you are, Memsahib wants to pluck some champak flowers on trees growing in the yonder hill."

Chaobhal walked with his head holding like a goose chasing some object and bowed his head. He pretended not to look at the two who walked up the hill behind the shrubs.

The strong breeze flopped the leaves of the tall teak trees. The afternoon birds twittered seeking their nests. The sun slid under the forest-clad tops of hills and the sunshine raced from the foot of the hills to the bare tops of the hills. The strong breeze made leaves of trees dance in the evening and it soothed Chaobhal who sat on the green knoll and dozed off. The wind blew quite relentlessly as he slept and it was only the strong breeze that fluttered the broad leaves of teaks that awoke him. He suddenly sprung on his feet and he looked around and found his master and the memsahib strolling on the paddy-fields with dry and short paddy stalks. Her face was red under her white bonnet gasping of breaths. The prince walked towering over her. Chaobhal handed over the bridles to the Senapati and the memsahib who mounted on their horses and followed the two homeward.

"Your Royal Highness, do your customs allow an English lady to marry a Manipuri prince?" Ethel said as she rode abreast with the prince.

"Why, memsahib, is there any custom to forbid a lady to marry a man of her choice, be he a prince or any commoner!"

said the Senapati with a half smile. His reddish beard shone in the falling sunshine.

"Is it, Your Royal Highness?" she said as she rode almost touching his elbows.

"And, of course she has to come under the fold of the Hinduism and her sons may ascend the throne," the prince said nodding his head.

They rode along the sandy bank of the Iril river and Chaobhal followed them behind. Ethel's face rose inhaling the cool air raising from the river and she saw the reddish glow of the setting sun in the western sky over a vast stretch of paddy-fields and myriads of temple bells tolled in the surrounding villages for the evening prayers in the temple. To her, the little sleeping town of Imphal was awake at the vesper only and she looked around quite enthralled at the sound of the bells ringing quite relentlessly. It was already dark when she arrived at the residency and she saw her husband sitting in his room with a back copy of Harper. She walked past him with her hand-gloves dusting on her palms.

Next day, the Senapati, attired in silk achkon walked out of the Top Garod with Kajao. "The exile syndrome had surfaced again," he said to the courtier who followed him, "now I want to see the Yubarajah for a minute or two and I had not seen him for the last few days." Kajao followed him without saying anything. They walked towards the royal office on the cobble-path. Only a few kuts and lallups walked on the road and on seeing the Senapati they knelt on the road and bowed their heads.

"Ipu Pukhramba, did you not see any peasants from Lamding who came to the palace to lodge a complaint to the Yubarajah or the Maharajah for the horse case?" the Senapati said as he walked towards the Yubarajah's office.

"Senapati, something is in the offing, I heard from the retinues of the Sagol Hanjaba that the parents of the rustlers lodged a complaint with the Political Agent not with the Maharajah or the Yubarajah," Kajao said in a sedate voice, "better meet the Yubarajah. He might have an idea of the whole thing."

"Ipu, so I want to see the Yubarajah just now, have you seen him leaving his office?" the Senapati said as he paced towards the royal office. On reaching the stairs of the office, he saw the sentries standing on the door-steps. They bowed their heads as

he approached the office.

"Is Yubarajah in the office?" he said looking at the kuts.

"No, Senapati," one kut said.

"But what are the sounds that come from the Yubarajah's office?" the Senapati asked quite puzzled. He walked towards his office with quickened paces. The giggling sound of children came from the office-room of the Yubarajah. He wondered what the noise could be or did the Yubarajah attend the office with his sons and grandsons. But the Yubarajah never did such things. His head reeled and he quickened his steps to see if the Yubarajah did attend his office with such uncourtliness. It was he who was deprived of such rude and scant decency!. He knew that it was he who extricated himself from any vice. Raking his head in such thoughts, the Senapati pulled the door with a jerk and to his surprise, he saw Prince Lukhoisana sitting on the gaddi of the Yubarajah dangling his feet in the air.

"Achacha, Lukhoi, what are you doing here?" the Senapati shouted in disgust, "could I believe my own eyes, achacha, a green-horn in your age, what mischief have you committed, you don't realise!" Blinding his eyes with rage, he slammed the door and paced towards the Top Garod without a word. Kajao ran following him apprehending that something ugly scene might take place. He saw him barging into the Top Garod and slammed the door with a violent cracking sound. Ushaba saw all this and raced towards the Senapati crying, "Ipu Pukhramba Phingang, what happened to the Senapati? Oh, something very unusual scene might have taken place." He waved his head in utter dissent and dis-satisfaction and looked the approaching man in total amazement. "What is that, Ipu, please tell me?" he said holding his hand. "Just unpleasant to tell you, it is an incident that cannot be hushed up!" Kajao said whispering to him. "Tell me Ipu, we, poor lallups may have an inkling of what happened to the princes, be he the Senapati or the Sagol Hanjaba!" Ushaba said stepping with the man.

Both stood before the closed door of the Top Garod without a word listening to the sound inside the big room. Nothing was heard for a few minutes and after a while sounds of tapping the floor by knee-high shoes were heard and the door suddenly opened, and the Senapati emerged from the room saying "Ushaba,

you bring my chestnut horse, be quick." Ushaba almost ran to the stable near the Top Garod and put the saddle on the horse. He took the horse by the bridle and handed over the latter to the Senapati who mounted on the horse and cantered towards the western gate. He slashed and swished the horse-whip and galloped towards the north along the palace moat. He rode till he reached the vast paddy-fields of the Porompat and there he stopped and looked around for a while breathing the cool breeze which blew over the dry stalks of paddy. The sun shone with all its glory. Its golden rays painted the small lake and the nearby groves of mangoes and sugar-canes. He trotted his horse along the dusty road and wended his way towards the lake of Yaral which he visited last afternoon with Ethel. On reaching the bank of the lake he dismounted from the horse and sat on the green grass. He plucked a sheaf of paddy and looked at the thick cluster of lotuses growing on the lake.

"What could it be, such child won't do such things out of his own volition, no never, the Maharani and the Sagol Hanjaba and a host of others have conspired to insult the Yubarajah and his other brothers. He is almost a saint and he won't covet such gaddis, power or pelt!" he said to himself as he sat quite restless, "who could defy the curse of Sir Chandrakirti."

Prince Angousana, the only son of Rani Haobam Chanu had always one ear cocked to the exile syndrome. Being of different uterine brothers, they had the same breath and feeling and grouped together with the Yubarajah, the Senapati, and Prince Jillangamba, the youngest brother. The latter slipped into his sanggai in the night and waited in his chamber till the Dolairoi Hanjaba had returned from the palace. The exile syndrome had already raged the zenana mahal as well as the kuts barracks, not to speak of the sanggais of the princes. Their eldest brother, Maharajah Surchandra was tight-lipped in all these matters. So went the rumour that Maharani Premamayee had sway over her husband like Raj Mata Kumudini over her son, Sir Chandrakirti in almost all the state policies. Younger princes who sought favours from the Maharajah, their eldest brother cast aspersion on the latter. "What to do, young Jillangamba!" Angousana said adjusting his tuft of hairs, "Sagol Hanjaba's eldest brother is the ruling king and we belong to the sons of the kachha or subaltern Ranis! Just wait time and please don't say anything to the

Senapati because he was too much shocked to find that even the green-horn Lukhoisana had aspired to the Yubarajah's gaddi."

Angousana drew out his sword and brandished it in his chamber. "Jilla, the one that comes on our way shall perish on this sword. Don't dishearten!"

Prince Jilla looked at the prince with his mouth agape.

"Not only that, Sagol Hanjaba is going to move the heaven and earth to exile the Senapati and this time the Yubarajah will not hear the case but the Sagol Hanjaba. He is going to wrest the magisterial power from the Yubarajah who incurred the displeasure of the Political Agent at the trial of case where one British subject was wrongly punished," Angousana said fumbling over his words "not only that they are going to starve you, young chap."

"Has the Senapati, my brother known all these trashes," Jilla said biting his lips.

"God knows! But had he seen the Yubarajah in his office-chamber, he might have gotten the latest development on the issue of the horse-lifting by Thotpa and Bapu, the two poor retainues of the Sagol Hanjaba and the darkhast to the Agent Sahib by the parents of the rustlers," Angousana said looking with mournful looks at Jilla.

"What my brother, the Senapati would think if he gets all the information?" Jilla said looking quite sedate.

"Jilla, let us talk everything to the Senapati and apprise him of the situation," Angousana said standing with his hands on his waist.

The two princes stomped out of the room and they dashed towards the stable and jumped on their horses. With flurry of horses they galloped towards the Senapati's sanggai. Like a steeple-chase, the two princes jumped over the gate one by one. Meechao Lallup who stood in the darkness with Heikha Chaoba on the night-watch near the gate sprang back on looking at the urgency of the two princes.

"Who stands on duty as sentry?" Angousana shouted in the darkness.

"Sanakhwa, Meechao Lallup and Chaoba! And why so in a hurry?" Meechao Lallup said with a smile.

"Has the Senapati returned to his sanggai?" Jilla bawled out.

"Not yet, Sanakhwa!" Meechao shouted back "the Senapati has not returned from the royal office."

Indeed, the Yubarajah sent Kajao, known as the Pukhramba Phingang to the Top Garod to see him in the royal office and had left his office for a while for having a talk with the Maharajah on the trial of the Senapati for flogging the two rustlers. But when he left the chamber of the Maharajah, he found him looking at him with his mouth agape but he did not disclose who sat on his gaddi and who turned his office-room into a mess. He walked on the pavement chanting his rosaries. "Did you not see the Senapati?" he said to him.

"Yubarajah, the Senapati attended your office but left suddenly" Kajao said as they entered his office. He looked around, his eyes rolling. The sleepy fan-puller fanned the big velvet fan with frills.

"Why, Kajao, the Senapati left the room so quickly?" he said.

"Yubarajah, perhaps on a piece of urgent business!" Kajao replied showing signs of agitation on his face. "but Yubarajah, when the trial will commence? Would the Sagol Hanjaba be the judge?"

The Yubarajah opened his eyes but he said nothing. He closed his eyes without saying anything. His hand counted the rosaries enjoying the cool wind made the big velvet-fan. The wily Kajao did not breathe anything to the Yubarajah about the childish prank of young Lukhoisana in his chamber. He saw the Yubarajah ride to his sanggai on the palanquin under a white pe, a parasol. He followed the royal troupe near the Kangla Sha, the dragon and saw Chaobhal sitting on a stone-seat looking around.

In the zenana mahal there were hushed whispers about the incident of young Lukhoisana's sitting on the Yubarajah's gaddi but his mother, Premamayee said nothing. She kept her young son caressing him in her chamber. She said that Prince Pakkasana was tipped to become the judge as the magisterial powers had been to be taken from the Yubarajah. She looked up in the ceiling and saw petals of roses carved on the ceiling. "Could it materialise in a day or two," she said to herself. She turned her back on hearing the foot-steps and saw Pitamber entering her chamber with a beaming smile.

"Pitamber, why in such a battle-dress?" she said to Pitamber pouting her lips.

"Well-wishers of the Maharajah must be always battle-worthy, is it not, Maharajah?" he said feeling shy at being making a remark on his unusual dress at such an explosive moment. He sat down a chair looking his eyes on Maharani's face. "So oddish!" she said to hurry inaudibly.

"What is the news, Pitamber?"

"Everything is fine! Lord Govinda blesses the Maharajah and what the Maharani aims with her arrows hit the target," Pitamber said with a beaming smile.

"Pitamber, if God blesses, young Lukhoisana will sit on the gaddi of the Yubarajah and in a day or two, the Sagol Hanjaba will try the Senapati for flogging Thotpa and Bapu and you see they are still lying in the residency hospital. The Agent sahib was sour about this," she said in her sing-song tone.

"The exile case may arise because the Agent sahib was angry with the Senapati, this I learnt from all the quarters," he repeated again.

The Senapati, his face morose and withdrawn drew the bridle as he reached his gate and he dismounted from his chestnut horse at his Leitong sanggai. He threw the bridle to his syce and with firm and heavy footsteps he paced towards his room where he was accosted by his wife just at the threshold.

"Sanakhwa, what happened, just arrived as such an hour?" his wife said looking at the Senapati with tears in her eyes.

The Senapati said nothing but he avoided her face as he gasped for breaths; he stood facing the stuffed tiger in the dimly lit room.

"Nothing, so to say precisely!" the Senapati said apologetically.

"Pukhramba Phingang came two times from the Yubarajah to inform Sanakhwa that he wanted to see you to-day," she said in soft tones, "everybody learns about young Lukhoisana's obstinacy."

"Of course, no such things happened during the late Maharajah's time," he said in a shaky voice. "I fear the accursed battle between the Maharajah and me will surely break out in no time. The curse of Sir Chandrakirti!"

The Senapati suddenly rose from the chair and emerged out of the room calling "Syce, syce, give my horse!" The syce put the saddle again and led the horse to his master in the dimly lit courtyard. He took the bridle and jumped on his horse saying "Where is Chaobhal, follow me!"

The Senapati galloped his chestnut horse towards the Yubarajah's sanggai in the darkness and Chaobhal, his retinue followed him closely. After a while, he handed over the bridle to the retinues of the Yubarajah who greeted him by kneeling before him in the dimly-lit arched gate, and he walked past the rows of barracks where the Yubarajah's three hundred kuts stayed in his sanggai. He entered his chamber with Tekendradhaja, the son of the Yubarajah. Like a recluse, the Yubarajah sat on a rug chanting the rosary and said, "Well, Koireng, I met you this time and I wanted to see you in my office but I could not, what happened to you, I don't know."

The Senapati sat on a chair after doing the usual curtsy of kneeling before him and listened to him.

"Koireng, the Sagol Hanjaba is going to try you for the horse-lifting by the two boys of Lamding," he said in a sedate voice.

"Why so, Yambung?" the Senapati said in a jerky voice. "why Pakka should try me, is he competent?"

"The Sagol Hanjaba is keen on getting the powers of the magistrate from me," the Yubarajah said raising his chin.

"Why, Yambung?"

"God knows!"

"The Agent sahib also does not like the last trial of the British subject," the Yubarajah said "I learnt that here were lots of grumbling in the residency for judgment given to the man living in the British India."

"They think that the man living in the British India does no wrong and is beyond the jurisdiction of the Maharajah of Manipur," the Senapati said in his resounding voice.

"Indeed, Grimwood sahib is a new hand in administration and let us see what it may happen," the Yubarajah said waving his face.

"The Sagol Hanjaba is going to try me, it is just not the end of the game. How they forget the curse of Sir Chandrakirti. Just

funny, poor Sagol Haniaba is now insolvent contracting huge debts of the banias and the merchants from Calcutta and how he could live on a princely pittance! He could get some shining silvers from the horse-dealers for issuing pass for import-export of horses, and at least some presents from the Dhaka or Comilla merchants. Could he manage his highly expensive life, throwing silvers on the nautches, the kang-plays and the many festivals that fill the whole year in this land!" the Senapati said waving his hand in the dimly lit chamber, "but he is now a spendthrift, a wastrel throwing money everywhere he goes."

The Yubarajah looked at the Senapati counting his rosary.

"Now the Sagol Hanjaba thinks that he could take kwagoks of silver coins for dispensing justice in the Top Garod, alright let him do whatever he likes, I have had my own decisions also and he too!"

"Koireng, the decision of exile or death rests with the Maharajah, and I think he won't throw the dice that he may loose!" the Yubarajah said in mincing words.

"See, Yambung, young Jilla is not entitled to any princely allowance or salaries and the growing animosity between the two camps is also raising and how the Sagol Hanjaba galls him at every step, he is very young, and young as he is, he will some day go beyond his sense on a some trifling issue and he may ignore our beloved father's curse," he said in a shaky voice.

"Pray to God and He will help those who tread upon the path of the righteous!" the Yubarajah said with his eyes closing and muttering prayers, "Koireng, man cannot rot living subservient to man save under trees and bamboos, the old adage says. Any animosity would turn against you and me and therefore you must restrain the younger princes, especially, Jilla. You go home, it will be late. Rest contented that nothing will harm you and let the Sagol Hanjaba do whatever he likes."

The Senapati bowed and left the chamber; his shoes tapped violently on the courtyard; Chaobhal followed the Senapati behind him on his horse. The two shadowy figures riding on the horses trotted lazily without any words under the rows of bamboos and big peepul trees. Heaving a sigh like the long drawn whining sounds of the winter gust, the Senapati rode almost at zero speed. His left hand gripped the hilt of his sword with sweat. "No,

no!" he cried out feebly and sighed, "that can't happen! Could I not punish the rustlers who stole my horse but the Sagol Hanjaba pleaded that he gave the horse to his favourite retainers. How could one give away other's chattel to his own slaves, no, never, that can't happen! He had sown the seeds of hatred! I find myself a stranger in my father's mansion and that is the fate of a broken home. Did I not play with the birds chirping in the garden, dreaming of my mother's love and affection." One sunny evening a shadow rose over his head from behind; the shadow lengthened with the ghostly figure which was no other than that of old Thangal. His shrunken face pressed out a smile, a favour, a fatherly love, a friend, a hope and a future! The old man took his slender and sweaty hands in his big hands and they sat face to face and he would weave tales of chivalry and the myths of the ancient kingdom of the Pakhangba! "Sanaton. Sanaton", the old general cried out and he acted the battle scenes, both lost and won in the past. He drew his sword and danced on the fencing stances, "Sanaton, a prince should act like a prince, shouting to the sardars and kuts quite imperiously, a prince to kill and rule, a prince to strike and subdue the strong, fencing not for funs," the old general said sitting on a chair in the palace-garden.

The scenes fled in his eyes as he rode his chestnut horse towards his sanggai. He said with a sigh, the old Agent sahib was a John Bull who made his life miserable, his persistent secret political correspondences, his blue books for the fourth prince made all the British residents washed their hands in water at the name of the fourth prince. "Booh, booh!" he cried out quite disappointed, "but could I cut all the cords of illusions that bind me! What agreements, what concords, what treaties and what Lord Northbrook said to Sir Chandrakirti on the streamer on the boisterous Barrack river! Am I an infamous prince, son of a lewd mother, am I a dirty prince, my English tutor says, the barrel-chested James refused to put my foot-prints on the precincts of the residency! The old heck James, that colonel who black-mailed old Thangal humiliated this land! He forgets that the old man is the guardian angel who guards the freedom of the land!"

The chestnut horse cantered on the dusty road snorting in the darkness of night and the rider sitting on the animal mute and silent. The horse stood still on the courtyard of the Senapati and stood silent. Chaobhal jumped from his horse and he took the

bridle from his master and he gave it to the syce. Both said nothing. The Senapati went to his chamber and threw himself on the chair with a jerk. Poor Chaobhal was beside himself when his master was non-plussed in such a situation. "Tomorrow, his master will be tried by the Sagol Hanjaba in the court," he said to himself.

"Just incredible, Chaobhal," the Senapati bawled out to Chaobhal, "one day, Pakka will raid my sanggai and imprison my little son and me, and Jilla and on the next day people will find my body exposed on the execution-ground, may be the nearest execution-ground at the China brick-bridge or at Wangkhei-pungjao, of the Moirangkhom mound. People would jeer at my dead body and I, unable to drive the flies away from my body breathless and bound in jute-ropes. Am I wrong to be one of the sons of Sir Chandrakirti? Am I born of chance! Is my life a chance! Chances are nothing, nothing, of course, nothing!"

Chaobhal left the chamber after making the usual curtsy.

The sun rose with its copper colour, more angrily than ever. The Sagol Hanjaba sat on the chair of the judge quite forgetful of the itching under his silk achkon. He started the day's work with the petty cases of pawn and mortgage. Moni Lal and Rasa Raj sat beside him watching his master to dispense justice.

The Senapati and the Top Garod were one and indistinguishable and quite unperturbed he came on a palanquin under the white pe fluttering its silk frills in the morning breeze. He sported a silver tobacco pipe with a tengnou-like chellam and he puffed the smoke with sedate eyes. His eyes bespoke of a malaise, a tale; his legs walked leaden and listless. Ushaba knelt before him without a word as he walked inside the office. Chaobhal almost ran with the green hilt sword behind him.

The Senapati sat on the chair with a jerk and with his face unkempt he looked sedate. The crowd before the Top Garod had already assembled as the sun broke from the fleeting clouds. "Chaobhal, let nobody allow to see me to-day," he bawled out to Chaobhal breaking the silence in the office, "you go and tell Ushaba." Chaobhal bowed and left the chamber. The latter emerged out of the chamber. He saw the Sagol Hanjaba and his retinue approaching towards the Top Garod under a big spreading pe, and beside him walked Moni Lal Dey and Rasa Raj, the wily

Brahmin and they entered the Top Garod. Thotpa and Bapu, the two rustlers were standing near the door-way and they followed the Sagol Hanjaba behind. The hearing of case started. Rasa Raj shouted the names of the two rustlers, "Thotpa and Bapu of Lamding village are to attend the court." All looked at the scene with alacrity. They looked around and whispered among themselves.

"The accused Sanakhwa Koireng is also to make hazir in the court," Rasa Raja shouted half mumbling but within the hearing range of the crowd in the court-room.

The elder men in the crowd grinned and blinked their eyes quite surprised. Chaobhal stood in a corner of the court quite enthralled at the scene. He saw the elder people whispering among themselves, "It seems quite absurd to make the Senapati to attend the court at a time when the Sagol Hanjaba is the judge and the case is also for stealing the Senapati's own horse. just odd to find the Senapati in the accuses, dock," an old man said to a man standing near. Chaobhal left the court-room and hustled towards the Senapati's office; only a few paces he made and then he almost ran.

"Sanakhwa, Sanakhwa," he cried as he knocked the door "please, I am Chaobhal".

"Just push the door, it is open," the Senapati said from the room.

"Sanakhwa," Chaobhal cried out and he looked at his master as he held the edge of the door. Staring on his face he stood without a word for a few moments.

"What happened Chaobhal? You almost ran inside the office and stare at me like that," the Senapati said.

"Nothing, Sanakhwa," he replied as he studied his face.

"Sanakhwa, don't you get a warrant?"

"Warrant for what, you tell me frankly!" he said almost shouting.

With sudden knocks on the door Prince Angousana, the officer-in-charge of the Tammu Road barged inside the chamber yelping, "Sanakhwa, have you not heard, that your name is being called to attend the court for flogging the two rustlers just now!"

"So, what Angousana! Let them do whatever they like and let

them pass any judgment for flogging the two rustlers who lifted my horse," the Senapati said in a shaky voice.

"Why so, Yambung?" Angousana said looking at his face quite disappointed.

"You all are young but you don't know that Srijut is backing the Sagol Hanjaba and so you all keep quite and just wait time," the Senapati said with emotion choking his voice.

"Yambung, let me hack him to pieces with my sword!" Angousana said in an emotion-charged voice, "it just cracks me up!"

"No, no, it is just a discourtesy shown to Srijut, just learn patience!" he said.

A dead silence settled in the room but the crowd outside the court-room jostled and elbowed among themselves to catch a glimpse of the Sagol Hanjaba. They raised their ears to listen to the judgment, "The accused is fined Rupees fifty for flogging Thotpa and Bapu of the Lamding village and he shall have to pay on the next day."

The week went on quite peacefully in the palace. The Sagol Hanjaba and his retinues attended the court in their finest achkon under a spreading pe. But everybody in the palace looked at the decree on the Senapati with a dismal look and they feared that a rupture might come in no time. The gossip-mongers of the Sanakeithel never stopped telling the endless tales of intrigues in the palace. Ushaba and Chaobhal sat near the doorway of the Top Garod and watched the whole proceedings of the court and not only that what they were most fascinated was the faces of the people they put up in the court. The people were not yet used to the Sagol Hanjaba's face sitting in the court-room hearing cases. Chaobhal saw the Sagol Hanjaba sitting chewing betel nuts and Rasa Raja sitting next to the prince and he wondered at the scene why the wily brahmin should sit next to the judge. He saw the accused stand before the presiding judge.

"What is the case?" Ushaba said nudging Chaobhal by his side.

"A case of adultery, one Sanakhomba lives in adultery with the wife of one Potshangba living at Haobam leikai," Chaobhal said looking towards the judge, "just listen what the accused gives his statement."

"How did it happen that you live a life of sin with other's wife?" Rasa Raj said in place of the Sagol Hanjaba.

"She coaxed me to fall in love with her," the man said in a discourteous tone.

"But why should you take liberty with other's wife?" Rasa Raj said looking at the man.

"Judge sahib, please put the question to the lady!" the man said.

The lady hung her face, her face almost hidden under her veil. Whispering and hissing filled the court-room and everybody waited eagerly to listen to her words.

"Where do you meet your paramour?" came the question from across the table.

"Judge sahib, in a temple of a Brahmin just at my locality," the lady said.

"Who is that?"

"The brahmin of my locality," the lady replied as she hung her face but her voice was drowned by the whispering voices of the crowd around.

The court ended but Chaobhal did not listen to the pronouncement of the decree and he asked one lallup who emerged out of the court-room "what decree?" "Nothing but thirty lashes on the brahmin and exposition of the fallen lady on the market-places," the lallup said as he walked away.

"What about the man, that paramour?" Chaobhal shouted at the lallup.

"Execution on the market-place!" came the answer.

"Ushaba, could it happen that the Sagol Hanjaba passed an order for execution of an accused?" Chaobhal said quite surprised.

"Please don't ask such question," Ushaba said as he held his hand in a whispering tone, "you had seen in your own eyes that the Sagol Hanjaba had tried the Senapati for flogging the two rustlers. The two looked at the Sagol Hanjaba and Rasa Raj pacing towards the gate near the Top Garod followed by the crowd."

The Sagol Hanjaba collected kwagokful of shining silver coins

after he took over the power of magistracy from the Yubarajah and he gave bakshish to Moni Lal Dey and Rasa Raj, the two shanglakpas and in the evening they rode on palanquins under fluttering silk pe. They attended clap-dances in the mandavs of the nearby localities of Yumnam leikai, Khurai and Wangkhei. In the morning the Sagol Hanjaba's adherents and lallups of the well-to-do families said "The Sagol Hanjaba's face is shining since he could collect kwagokful of shining silver after hearing cases!"

The Senapati sensed a vague feeling that he found no pleasure to attend his office-room in the Top Garod and he found himself sitting in his reception-room in his Leitong sanggai talking to his little son and he found that his room glittering with trophies, the stuffed tiger of Uchiwa, the crossed swords lay in their places like a musuem-house. He stood like the long-lost Senapati cast in a plaster of Paris in the middle of the room. He gasped and gasped for breaths; the boisterous and noisy wave had retired in the womb of the ocean leaving no traces in the dark and murky sea-scape! The sound of bugles and band awoke him from his slumber in the morning and he turned his face and saw Chaobhal sitting like a faithful terrier in a corner of the room. He raised his head on hearing the sound of the bugle and said "Senapati, the Sagol Hanjaba is going to hunt a tiger with the Agent Sahib and the prince is now facing a favourable weather! of course, the youngest prince, Jilla wished hunting a tiger but the Sagol Hanjaba got an upper hand in lobbying in the Top Garod and also Srijut being his own brother commissioned him to do the hunting. Of course, Grimwood sahib is with him!"

The Senapati avoided looking at him and he said nothing but he looked sedate as he supported his head on his palm. He looked at his son playing in the room. "Chaobhal, every man has his own hey day and wait time," the Senapati said in a sedate voice, "I shall go to the Top Garod to-day and have not attended for the last few days and I just hate them sitting on the Top Garod. What about the two rustlers? Of course, they are set free."

"Sanakhwa's star needs some pratigya, the Rahu and Ketu are against the Senapati," Chaobhal pleaded quite sedately.

"Lord Govinda, Thou hast not smiled on me!" he said and yawned faintly and uttered scornful laughs. "What is amiss with

me, nothing amiss with me. Only the palace is worn out with scornful hatred," he said to himself, "but Chaobhal, I shall attend the Top Garod to-day. Hurry up."

The Senapati rose from the chair and he donned his dresses. Putting on his silk achkon, he took the pistol from the drawer and kept it under his achkon. He handed over his green hilt sword to Chaobhal and he went to the Top Garod on his palanquin. His retainers put the pe over his head. Puffing the smoke placidly, he looked sedate and morose. He proceeded towards the Garod. As soon as he approached the Top Garod he saw a small crowd in front of the Garod and he heard the snapping sound of whipping. He sat on the palanquin puffing the smoke quite placidly unmindful of the crowd and the flogging and at the stairs, he dismounted from the palanquin and went on the stairs.

"Senapatiji, Senapatiji, help me, save my soul!" cried one voice. The Senapati turned back and saw a man with a naked trunk rushing towards him. The prince looked at him with scrutinising eyes.

"What happened?" said the Senapati with a soft and endearing tone.

"Senapatiji, I am a brahmin, and for no fault of my own, the Shanglakpa has decreed to lash me thirty lashes and am downgraded to a lower caste," the man pleaded in a shrill voice.

"Who is the Shanglakpa?" the Senapati shouted angrily.

"Rasa Raj, the Shanglakpa!" the man cried out with tears in his eyes.

"Is it so?" the Senapati said angrily "stop lashing."

The crowd said yes; everybody looked towards the Shanglakpa who supervised the whipping. Some pointed their fingers towards him. The Senapati gasped for breaths and walked angrily towards Rasa Raj and held him on his shirt near his neck and dragged him towards the lock-up in the Top Garod and pushed him inside the cell. "Ushaba, mind that this man should not be released until I give my orders," the Senapati said with a grin.

All around the Top Garod looked with awe and the crowd thinned within minutes. "Could the Senapati tolerate such ugly scenes! A shanglakpa is acting as the magistrate during the

absence of the Sagol Hanjaba!" an elderly lallup whispered to a kut standing nearby. "Indeed, it is too much! Rasa Raj has become the judge during the absence of the Sagol Hanjaba!"

Chaobhal rushed towards the court-room and took Rasa Raj by his arms and dragged him into the lock-up the Top Garod. All the kuts who loved the Senapati cried angrily, "You poor brahmin, your reward for acting as the judge and you pass the night in the cell with smell of urine and human excreta!"

The crowd turned their faces towards the sound of the flurry of horses under the tall silver oak trees and they saw Prince Angousana and Prince Jilla galloping towards the gate of the Top Garod and they dismounted from the horses quickly and barged inside the Senapati's office-room crying "Yambung, Yambung"! They found the Senapati resting his back on a chair resting his head on his hand.

The wily Rasa Raj passed the night in the lockup in the Top Garod, the buzz of the summer mosquito disturbing his peaceful sleep and he said that his soul never would take rest till his master take revenge on the Senapati's retinues. He began to cash in on the growing rivalry between the two camps. He repented that had not his master, the Sagol Hanjaba gone to the hunting at the far-off village, he would not meet with such ugly incident. On the next day, the Sagol Hanjaba rode his black horse as soon as he reached the palace and shouted to the kuts who put his retinue, Rasa Raj in the lock-up of the Top Garod. He skilfully avoided to elude the Senapati's name. The brahmin avoided any evening walk with his friends and he kept himself confined in the sanggai of his master. One evening the wily brahmin told Moni Lal Dey "Moni Babu, let us take a stroll just along the palace moat in front of the residency. It is just nice to see the princesses visiting the residency. These princesses never stop paying calls on the memsahib, bah, the Senapati taking evening ride with the memsahib, and the Engrez sepoy and officers flirting with the princesses. Just nice! The little ones, these princesses, I am sure, of course, there is Mikoi, the little pretty daughter of the old general, would end marrying Engrez officers!"

They rode along the palace moat and saw a white parasol emerging from the western gate of the palace and some palanquins were seen on the road. Near the southern gate they dismounted from the horses and they sat under a tall peepul tree and

watched them. The Senapati rode his chestnut horse beside the palanquins "High time, Moni Babu, the Senapati is now visiting the memsahib with the princesses and let us turn back and tell everything to the Sagol Hanjaba," Rasa Raja said as he rose from the ground in haste. He walked to and fro quite restless. Moni Lal looked at Rasa Raj quite surprised. They saw the Senapati escorting the princesses to the residency and after a few minutes they saw him riding out of the northern gate towards the northern gate of the palace. As Rasa Raj saw the Senapati leave the residency gate, he said "Moni Lal, the time is come, let us proceed to the sanggai of the Sagol Hanjaba and inform him that the princesses were visiting the bangalow without any male escort and let the prince apprehend the retinues of the Senapati at the very gate of the residency. Come hurry up! Hei ho!" Rasa Raj let loose the bridle and galloped towards the bridge of Sanjenthong. When they returned it was nearly dusk but the princesses had not emerged out of the residency gate. But the retinues of the Senapati had already entered the gate of the residency to escort the princesses at the bidding of the Senapati who had already told them to escort the little princesses. Rasa Raj walked along the moat from the southern side of the residency with the kuts from the sanggai of the Sagol Hanjaba and as they neared the northern gate he heard the gigglings of the girls riding palanquins. The princesses sensed something unusual at the sight of Rasa Raj and the kuts.

"Hei lallups, you stop! I am coming with a warrant of arrest for you, lallups. The Sagol Hanjaba has ordered to sieze you two and you should not go further," Rasa Raj shouted at the top of his voice.

The two lallups looked back quite surprised and stood waiting Rasa Raj and the kuts. The kuts took hold of the lallups and dragged them who cried out "We are escorting the princesses at the order of the Senapati and what are you doing now?"

"Now only you have to obey the orders of the Sagol Hanjaba." Rasa Raj said in a shrill voice.

The little princesses were quite shaken with fear and with beady eyes they looked at the shanglakpa with fear. Mikoi knew that Rasa Raj's contempt for the Senapati was unbounded since his arrest at the Top Garod and she said to herself, "See the fun when the Senapati learns everything about this." Ombisana

supported herself on her holding her skirt steadfastly. Later they saw the awful scene of manhandling their escorts and they scuttled towards the gate of the residency.

The news spread like wild-fire in the palace. With flurry of horses, Prince Angousana and Jilla galloped towards the Leitong sanggai and they saw the Senapati sitting in his room talking to Chaobhal. He was found cuffing a little; his eyes showed a seeming faint-heartedness to allay excitement. He nodded his head in the oil lamp lit room as the two princes knelt before him.

"Why so much in a haste, Angousana and Jilla?" the Senapati said beaming his eyes. His voice sounded gruff words.

"Have you not heard, Yambung?" Angousana said with a morose look.

"Of course!" said the Senapati smiling faintly his eyes shining with a disdainful manner.

"Yambung, shall we sit cross-legged when the Sagol Hanjaba insults us at every step?" Angousana said looking at his eyes.

The Senapati said nothing but his looks lingered. "But, but, Angousana, we could do. Can we do anything when Srijut lets loose the Sagol Hanjaba!" he said.

"Yambung, the turn comes for me," Jilla said holding his head towards the Senapati under the oil-light.

"What, Jilla?"

"A tiger-hunting!"

"Where?"

"At Keirao village in a ravine called Tekhambi", Jilla said beaming his eyes.

"But, Jilla," the Senapati said looking his eyes quite blank, "I have a question to ask?"

"What is that?" Angousana said looking at his eyes.

Jilla looked at the two with surprise damping his lips with his tongue. But he saw the Senapati unable to say anything.

"We have to see in the darbar in the Top Garod next day and a decision will be made in the darbar but the Sagol Hanjaba would fight to the end not to allow you to do the hunting!"

"Why, Yambung!" Angousana cried out jumping from his seat, "he would say Prince Jilla is not yet entitled to any princely status, not admissible to princely allowances, not being a member of the darbar this would not happen this time!"

"Alright let us wait tomorrow, pray to Lord Govinda!" the Senapati said looking in the darkness. Later he felt drowsy, his eyes full of latent anger. The two princes looked at him with deaden and cool eyes.

The next morning came with the blare of bugles and the band. Prince Jilla led the hunting party amidst the jubilation of his followers. All cried "A tiger born for the youngest prince, Jilla-ngamba! A tiger for Jilla-ngamba!" The Senapati sent the state bugle to Jilla and he heard the bugle searing the morning calm with its hooting sound. He saw the reddish morning sun breaking through the tangle of shreds of clouds. And he heaved a sigh of relief. A sudden feeling of mixed pity and affection surged in his heart; he could not understand why; it issued from the pit of his heart, an urge, a striving for survival, the tear and sweat, the dynamo of life. His eyes moistened, his nerves strained and muscles flexed. Only tears could speak the long tale of his life. Am I passing through a long tunnel, pitch dark and smouldering. Jilla's commission for the big-game is a sign of victory for their camp, he said to himself. His eyes showed vividly the dramatic ends of Borachaoba and the chivalrous Wangkheirakpa. In a night his house might be besieged and he might be dragged out from his Leitong sanggai and thrown him in the jail at the Nongpok-Engkhol, next to Paona Brajabashi's cell. And he might spend his life in the jail after a mock trial by the Sagol Hanjaba or he might perish on the execution-ground! Now Jilla, the youngest prince could hunt a tiger! A momentary sigh of relief! Next the youngest prince would approach the Maharajah for a princely allowance and a seat in the royal darbar!

The sound of hoofs over the hard courtyard distracted his mind; he raised his ears to know why the rider would come to him bringing any important tidings. He thought Jilla had not even crossed the Sanjenthong bridge or did he pick up any quarrel with the shanglakpas of the Sagol Hanjaba. Who is

coming, Meechao Lallup?" he said looking at the tall lallup.

"Chaobhal, Senapati, in a hurry is Chaobhal, what happened, let me ask him," the lallup said in a puzzle, "oh, he is just here now."

All looked at Chaobhal with surprise. He knelt before the Senapati and said, "Sanakhwa Jillangamba is insulted by the Sagol Hanjaba at Wangkhei just now!"

"Chaobhal, don't speak garbage, and you sit properly and tell me how?" the Senapati said looking at his retinue with blood-shot eyes, "tell me what is all about this, what happened to Jilla, tell me why you hang your head so sadly."

"The state bugle you sent was forcibly taken by Pukhramba Phingang who came riding a horse and shouted 'Stop playing bugles, I am coming here to take the bugle. The Sagol Hanjaba sends me to take it, the prince who is entitled to carry the bugle in a hunting expedition is a full-fledged prince, not you, a chap'" he said in a quick succession of words, "Ipu Pukhramba Phingang, it is not you to decide," the prince said and he went on blowing the bugle and a row nearly started."

The Senapati said nothing but hung his head with his face reddened. Later he said, "Chaobhal, I just realise the hunting party might blow the bugle more with pitched tone turning towards the Sagol Hanjaba's sanggai while they crossed the Sanjenthong bridge," the Senapati said "and it might anger him, and you see there is already bad blood! You go again and say him 'Do nothing without my words and let him visit me as soon as he returns from the hunting. I want a detailed report from Jilla. And let him return from the hunting. Just wait time, Chaobhal."

Whispered talks filled the palace after the humiliation of Prince Jillangamba and his abject position after Sir Chandrakirti's death was the talk of the town. The Senapati also did not open the matter in the darbar because the Sagol Hanjaba would resist the bestowal of privileges upon the youngest prince. But the ministers started lobbying Jilla's case in the darbar. The wresting of the bugle on the thoroughfare of Wangkhei from the hunting party led by Jilla did emerge a knotty and a nebulous issue. Now everybody thought that it was beyond his reach. Nobody wanted to touch the issue any more.

"Let us wait till Jilla's return from the hunting at Keirao and let

us approach the Maharajah to-morrow or never," the Senapati said in a shaky but determined voice. "I cannot move out of my sanggai as a severe colic pain has siezed me to-day."

"Sanakhwa, please take rest," Chaobhal said as he knelt before the Senapati.

The band music wafted across the royal polo-ground as the hunting party returned from the Keirao village and the dead tiger tied on a long bamboo carried by the porters and kuts. The satmars walking heavily wore sedate looks on their faces in the dusk. The whole people of the Wangkhei watched the dead tiger carried by the hunting party and a huge crowd greeted the party. They had seen dead tigers carried by the princes but the crowd was bigger than any other crowd at such an event. All they wanted to see was the young prince, Jilla's countenance which was blacker than the char-coal because of the humiliation he got from Kajao, the Pukhramba Phingang. His face, an elderly person said was no bigger than a mustard seed which he could not conceal from the gaze of the crowd. His face was haggard, weary and pallish. Heaving sighs with scornful laughs, he swayed his head in the evening breeze.

The Senapati lay on his bed while his wife sat on a velvet-covered mora before his bed and his son played on her lap. Piping the tobacco pipe of the silver hookah, he looked quite sedate. Both appeared quite sedate like two king-storks each standing on one leg engaging in an inexplicable riddle. He raised his head on hearing the hoofs of horses on the court-yard.

"Subedar, who are coming at this hour," the Senapati said to Tonu Subedar who had duty as sentry in the sanggai of the Senapati on the night.

Tonu made a curtsy and went out of the bed-room and to his surprise, he met the black eyes of Prince Jilla rolling in whites; quite taken back, he bent his head saying "The youngest Sanakhwa is visiting the Senapati." And he led the prince into the bed-room. He was in his hunting dresses, the knee-high boots, the turban and the dhoti, sword and pistol. He knelt on the carpet before the Senapati. He struggled with his feeling for a while as he sat on the chair containing the anger in his broiling head and burst out "Yambung Senapati, how long shall we live in such a condition! Tell me, tell me or in case I am a butcha, a youngling,

what are you doing sitting cross-legged? Yambung, am I a butcha, am I a butcha?"

The Senapati's shija was amazed at his manners coming out a highly surcharged emotion. The Senapati said nothing but he looked at the young prince with his eyes encountering his. He slowly rose from his bed while his shija watched him with curiosity. He sat on the chair heaving a sigh, his face and looks with determination. The stuffed tigers in his room grinned. "Jilla, a coward that I am! A coward that I am! To give a free rein to a hostile camp while we revere and respect Sir Chandrakirti's curse!" said the Senapati. He stood motionless gasping for breaths as he supported himself on the brick-wall with his hands and he thought that his sudden outburst was too much and he sat on the chair heavily and looked at Jilla, "Tomba, all I can say is, be patient!"

The Senapati heard the foot-steps of a man with boots and he turned back and saw Prince Angousana in his battle dress. "What happened Angousana in such an odd dress!" he said. The prince hung his face; the Senapati's shija embraced her only son on her bosom tightly. She saw everything up-side down and the metal tips of the black rhino-shields seemed like pop-eyes. She reeled her head as she saw the enactment of the pretenders' battle in her eyes.

The Sagol Hanjaba's retinues went ga-ga after the humiliation of the hunting party led by Prince Jilangamba on the road at Wangkhei. Rasa Raj attended the sanggai of the Sagol Hanjaba in the morning in his starched achkon and he was engaged in throwing dice on the dice-board in a corner of the verandah; a few kuts watched the game. "Oh, kuts, if you want get-quick-rich, don't forget dice-plays, 'tis neither easy nor difficult play! But to-day's gala dice-plays will commence just at ten O'clock and play till the end." "Shall we invite the Senapati's party, Rasa Raj," Moni Lal said to the brahmin trimming his beards, his long uneven front teeth grinning. "No, my dear Babu, they are as poor as paupers!" The dice-players came in twos or threes. Partha rolled out the mats under the peepul tree and he placed one small red carpet on the mat saying "And this is for the Sagol Hanjaba!" All gathered under the big tree near the gate of the sanggai of the Sagol Hanjaba. The vendors of the Wangkhei flocked around the players of the dice. All knelt as the Sagol

Hanjaba emerged out of the gate and he sat on the red carpet covered mat beside the dice-board and he started the dice by throwing the heavy ivory dice. All shouted as he cast the dice on the dice-board. The game went on; Prince Thambousna, the Shamu Hanjaba and Basak, the Bengali businessman and some other banias sat opposite the Sagol Hanjaba moving his thighs in an exhalation. Everybody shouted "Babu is quite lucky!" Basak collected the shining silver coins. Within a few minutes, the Sagol Hanjaba lost and Rasa Raj counted the silver coins from the string purse. The prince cast the dice but his luck reversed and he again collected all he lost. "Jai Lakshmi Devi," he shouted and threw the dice. Everybody saw the six figures; again the six figures! the six figures! A huge heap of shining silver coins lay in front of the Sagol Hanjaba and Rasa Raj counted the coins in tens. One kut carrying the state bugle peeped through the crowd at the dice-play while all the dice players and their fans created a hullabaloo. "Who is that spreading a big blowing bugle over our head," one lallup said on seeing the bugle. All on-lookers said to move away. "Wait, the bugler, let us blow the bugle every time the Sagol Hanjaba wins, I ask you all do you agree?" Rasa Raj said looking at the bystanders. Some nodded and some said "Please ask the Sagol Hanjaba." All pressed the prince but he did not give any reply. Again the six dots! The bugler sounded! Again the six dots! The bugler piped the bugle. "It is not right? Sanakhwa Sagol Hanjaba is presiding the dice and let us make it grand and imperial." The hullabaloo went on without any interruption and the Wangkhei pedlars of pigeons watched the dice-play and joined the crowd under the huge peepul tree with spreading branches.

"Hell, the bugle that a greenhorn could play at his prankish hunting for a seven-chilly tiger!" shouted the Sagol Hanjaba as he threw the dice. A perfect six dots! The bugle sounded blowing in the September sky.

The Sagol Hanjaba was quite shocked to see that only one dot was on the dice-board. Next round, only one dot or two! His eye-brows thickened and he started losing. He cast the dice with the six dots in his eyes but he found only one dot. One dot followed another! Rasa Raj counted the heaps of shining coins and the prince began to play on credit. Basak swayed his thighs as he looked the cast. He almost threw

with joy. Now the Sagol Hanjaba was penniless! And he stopped laughing with smiles but his cries became shriller and shriller. Rasa Raj said, "Basak Babu, let us not run from the game!" He looked at the brahmin with a down cast face. "What would happen if the Senapati comes to this dice-play!" one lallup said to another. "Hell, the Senapati would never set his foot beyond the bridge of Sanjenthong over the Imphal river. Jillangamba was taught a good lesson on the thoroughfare of Wangkhei on his way to Keirao!" said the Sagol Hanjaba as he threw the dice.

"The Senapati won't come, I bet!" Rasa Raj said with scornful laughs, "he fell ill on hearing that Jilla had grown up over-night and went on playing the state bugles for game of hide-and-seek with the big cat that mauled the girl like Kunjamala while fishing on the Thongrangbi lake!" "Did you not see the palanquin with red velvet and Sanakhwa Jilla sporting a silver tipped pipe in his mouth smelling of milk," Rasa Raj said again and he lifted his head on hearing calling "Sanakhwa Sagol Hanjaba". He saw the turbaned head of the old lallup chingba, Meechao and said "What Meechao Lallup Chingba and I do hope you are coming with the errand from the Kotwal." The old lallup said nothing but he knelt before the Sagol Hanjaba who paid no heed. "Lallup Chingba, what you wish here?" the prince said as he threw the dice. "Sanakhwa, only a few words from the Senapati," the old lallup said with his hands clasped before his chest. "What is that, lallup chingba?" he said avoiding looking at the old man.

"The Senapati conveys to the Sagol Hanjaba that dice-plays and disturbances on the public thoroughfares may be stopped forthwith," the old lallup said in all humility, "it would invite displeasure from the people."

The prince was mute and did not say anything but he kept himself engaged in throwing dice on the board. The old lallup bowed again and left the scene.

The old general Thangal and Col. Shamu were tight-lipped and never commented anything on the issue. They attended the royal office and left it after a full day's work. General Thangal attended the Top Garod at the noon and talked about the unconnected things, the Kongal case and the ivory ornaments and the tusks of elephants. Tonghu came in his sparkling colours

and talked about peace and friendship with the general. The Senapati smiled over the gestures of peace and ever-lasting friendship.

"But, Ipu, have you not seen the gang of dice-players on way from the sanggai beyond the bridge of Sanjenthong blowing bugles, not preceded before?" the Senapati said looking at the old general, his olive-eyes looking at the old man with a genial smile.

"Sanaton, let the Sagol Hanjaba do whatever he likes but for the people" Thangal said in a sedate voice.

"Of course, Ipu, no need to ignite the cinder!" the Senapati said looking at the old man's age-worn face, "never did Sir Chandrakriti intend a rupture among our brothers! But the Sagol Hanjaba may listen to his elder brother not as the regent to the king! An old man's advice is always good!" The old man's lips pressed each other and tight. He turned his face towards the door and saw Meechao kneeling before him and said "What does the Sagol Hanjaba say?" The old man said "Sanakhwa, I did meet the prince while playing."

"But I hear the bugle sounding, does he think that the state bugle could be played while playing dice?" the Senapati said to the lallup with beady-eyes.

The Senapati and Thangal emerged from the Top Garod and found that discordant blare of the bugle went on unceasingly; his hands squeezed and pressed into a tiny knot of muscle and anger vibrating every nerve. The waning heat of the after-noon dashed against him face but he found a million pinching all over his body and on his head under the silk turban. He gasped for breaths finding himself suffocating with breathlessness. He looked across the faded greenish colour of the royal pologround. The tip of the cacophonic blare of the bugle took its flight across the ground. His head reeled and shook him like a small jute plant in the strong breeze. He calmed himself and said, "Ipu, life is now sour!" "Why so, Sanaton, at such an age?" Thangal retorted with a grin. He said ahs and turned his face away and said to him "If love could be planted like the oleander seeds the house-wives could feed their husbands with the sweet smell!"

"Of course, Sanaton, it is correct, I know what you say!" Thangal said as they proceeded towards the palace on the cobbled path towards the east. He said in a prancing manner but it was a deception. The old general had already noted the orgy started by the Sagol Hanjaba after the humiliation of Prince Jilla with caution and instead of defusing the tension between the two rival camps, by a saner approach the two camps drifted to opposite directions. Old man said, "Sanaton" and he did stop abruptly throwing into the word a tone for friendship and alliance.

Chaobhal saw Ushaba sitting on a stool outside the Top Garod; he was late on that morning and found the Senapati sitting quietly in his office piping the silver tipped hookah placidly; he knelt and made some excuses for late coming with gruff voices. The tension was broiling; the bugle sounding with scornful puffs. The Senapati shut the door and he found the quietude. He piped the silver-tipped pipe placidly and found a sudden surge of a hot, pungent and putrid feeling; with a jerk he rose from the chair and he gasped for breaths from the cool air from the royal polo-ground. Chaobhal watched him as his eyes followed him closely with any amiss. The Senapati walked to and fro on the corridor. Chaobhal shadowed him like a dog. "Chaobhal, follow me," he shouted at the top of his voice, and he paced towards his chestnut horse and he mounted the horse and trotted towards the southern gate. Chaobhal rode behind him with the Senapati's green-hilt sword on the side of his horse. Quite apprehensive for some imminent danger, he rode clasping the sword, his head holding out like the goose. He saw the Senapati ride past the southern gate and headed towards the Sanjenthong bridge. He saw the stragglers on the bridge go away at a good walk. "Cries and shouts and the shrill blowing of bugle would burn up his qualms," he said to himself, "no good will come!" On seeing the Senapati approach the place of dice-play, the crowd made way for the prince who dismounted from his chestnut horse. With gruff sounds he paced to the place where the crowd watched the play just at the gate of the Sagol Hanjaba's sanggai. The hullabaloo melted at his sight. But the sound of throwing the heavy dice on the board sounded more distinctly.

The Senapati watched the dice play, his hands akimbo for a few moments and said, "The Sagol Hanjaba, what's all this? It is no good to play such games and after all you are holding the

office of a prince! Do you hear me, Sagol Hanjaba, please stop playing dice, it ruins the man who plays it, may be princes, may be the Maharajahs. Pakka, do you hear me, just remember the tragic tales of Judhisthira and his brothers who staked their kingdoms and the queen only to satisfy their lust for staking their wealth and respect!"

The Sagol Hanjaba looked with a sullen face and said, "Yambung, I am losing heavily, I shall play the dice till I win!" He threw the dice on the board with his eyes rolling in whites.

"Stop playing dice, I pray! Just remember what my dear father said, his last words, 'Stop playing dice, all my sons! Dice plays bring ruination among the clan! It is you who dishonour my father's last advice to us, he won't come back on this earth again to give another advice. His last words are the only words that we should never forget in our life. Do listen to me!" said the Senapati.

The Sagol Hanjaba encountered his face with an admonishing look running his eyes white and with his lips quivering, he bawled out "Stop disturbing me, Yambung, I say I shall play till I win. I'm losing so much money!" Saying so he threw the dice and lost again.

"No, no, dear brother, don't take recourse to such games that ruins all" the Senapati said with angry puffs and he knelt to take the dice from the dice-board. The Sagol Hanjaba leaped to his feet taking the heavy dice and hit the dice board with all his might. Drops of blood fell like drips on the dice-board. All looked in wonder and all wondered how the heavy ivory dice deflected like a dart and hit the Senapati's eyebrows; the prince saw the starlets swarming blurring his vision. Blood soaked his silk achkon as he reeled his head. His hand pressed his eye-brow and said "Where is the Sagol Hanjaba?" He put a kerchief on his face. The bystanders looked panicky and they quickly rose from the ground. He walked groggily towards his chestnut horse and hurled himself on his horse and he galloped towards the southern gate where the Sagol Hanjaba was riding towards the palace. Chaobhal did not comprehend what happened but he rode following his master whipping his horse. "Wait the Sagol Hanjaba, wait, wait I have to talk to you and smooth over the matter now, wait Pakka, Pakka", he shouted as he rode. Pakka looked as he rode towards the palace under the silver-oak-lined road.

The Senapati saw him dismount from the horse and walked towards the chamber of Maharajah. He also dismounted from his chestnut horse and quickly to over-take the prince. "Wait Pakka, wait Pakka, wait," he cried with a tremulous voice. The Sagol Hanjaba looked back with frightening looks and vanished as he crossed the verandah where Maharajah Surchandra sat on a red velvet covered chair, his retainers fanning him. The Senapati bowed his head as he saw him and looked at him who foresaw that something terrible had occurred. His eyes fell on his blood spattered achkon and he sensed that a row would start.

"Yambung, where is the Sagol Hanjaba?" said the Senapati with a tremulous voice looking at Surchandra who sat with a sheepish look. He looked at him staring blank and grouped for a ready reply with a slow dragging voice. He dampened his lips and said "Well, Koireng, where have you been? Did not see the Sagol Hanjaba at all, and !"

His reply made the Senapati stunned and he looked at the Maharajah without a word for a few moments appealing for love and affections. Perhaps for intervention! His lips quivered with emotion and his head made a little bow to him and left the place abruptly. The prince cursed his fate and the moment he was brought into this world. "But such pampering ruins the Sagol Hanjaba and brings the rupture in no time. As a ruler of the land he knows the skein of events that took place quite recently and even he sees blood on my achkon he keeps blind to all this, and the Sagol Hanjaba gypped him in all tussles, excelled in 'getting all favours from the Maharajah because of the uterine relation, hell," said the Senapati with the shrill jangle of voices ringing in his ears. He paced towards his chestnut horse and jumped on it and galloped towards his sanggai.

"Yambung, the big sana khongnang, the golden peepul tree with spreading branches is preventing many a people from safely going on the road under it near the bridge of Sanjenthong and show your gracious kindness to prune its spreading branches," the Senapati reminisced saying to his brother, the ruler of Manipur one afternoon when he was in a happier mood. He looked at him with a puzzle and did not expect the dig at his own brother, the Sagol Hanjaba and he blinked at the sarcasm and turned a deaf ear to him. Of course, it was an oblique remark. The Sagol Hanjaba's dice-plays at Sanjenthong had alienated the people

from the ruler of the land and such gambling had made almost all the princes paupers in the palace. The British resident was the Viceroy's agent who felt the pulse of the people and saw how they relished the Maharajah's rule! Hell, he cried and clenched his fist. He rode towards the Leitong sanggai, Chaobhal following him behind. It was the end of the game, he said to himself, everything happened under his own nose but he pretended not to know all this. He dismounted from his chestnut horse and threw the bridle to his syce and he barged into his room and slammed the door with aloud bang saying, "Don't allow anybody to enter this room!"

Guerre a mort, fight to the last ditch; he said to himself as he lay on the long chair; his shija washed the wound, gaping with thickened blood. Meechao lallup sat on the ground quite non-plussed. he sensed that the Sagol Hanjaba had become very obstinate and he would one day, pick up quarrel with the Senapati. He said "Now it has happened and a more sterner fight may ensue!" The kuts had already heard of the altercation between the two princes and did not comment anything. The Senapati lay on his bed for a day or two as the swelling had to subside. Late in the night a knock was heard and he suddenly rose from his bed and found Prince Jilla and Prince Angousana standing on the door-way. "Why, you don't come in the day-time, dear brothers, I'm quite alright, come, come!" he said affectionately. The new moon of September brought a gush among the tall peepul trees making musical fluttering sounds. The flying-foxes also flopped in the darkness.

A tense moment followed after the altercation at the dice-play at the gate of the Sagol Hanjaba; the Senapati did not attend the Top Garod after the incident. Old Meechao Lallup while retiring to his house saw Moni Lal Dey and Partha sneaking near the Leitong sanggai in the late night and he sensed that they were acting the surveillance on the advice of the Sagol Hanjaba. He slid under a huge peepul and watched them and after they had passed the Leitong sanggai and he turned back towards the Senapati's sanggai. "Sure the battle between the two camp would start because the youngest prince and Prince Angousana had had secret parleys with the Senapati in his bed-room and the moment Srijut gets scent of the secret meeting all the princes shall be charged with conspiracy to overthrow the king," Meechao

said to himself as he paced towards the sanggai in the darkness. The flying-foxes screeched above his head among the branches of the peepul tree and dropped left-overs of the fruits over his head. Of course, the Senapati should be informed that he was being watched, he said as he walked towards the Leitong sanggai. He saw all the princes in his bed-room.

The sun rose with more mellow light and the misty morning heralded the coming fall. But during the day-time, the sun shone with more crueller heat. The day of fourth Langban, he saw the spruce son of the Maharajah, Prince Lukhoisana riding past the gate of the Leitong sanggai with his retinues on horses gaggling on the road. He watched them riding past the gate and he looked at them thinking why they would intend to have chosen such a road when the atmosphere was surcharged with such a mistrust. The Senapati is my saviour who feeds my family, he said making his head drooping and he made himself engaged in the household works of the Senapati. I wish to serve the Senapati and I wish to die for him, he chanted while he dusted the green hilt of the Senapati and his epaulettes. He shouted "Oh, syce, why don't you clean the saddle of the chestnut horse, and in a day or two, the Senapati will attend the Top Garod." It was past noon when he left the sanggai and he cooked meals near the barrack. The old man washed the utensils after the meal and got a nap. It was almost dusk when he got up cursing his age. Dressing up he paced towards the Senapati's sanggai for the night duty. The lallups were seen strolling on the parade ground and he left the sanggai after doing the duty assigned to a lallup chingba. He made a chellam of tobacco in his hut and piped with a moody thought. Sounds pelting stones were heard across the fence on the roof of the Leitong. He raised his ears and heard the distant sound of pelting stones on the roofs of the sanggai of Prince Jillangamba. "What is it, kuts?" he cried at the top of his voice. "The nastachandra; the fourth day of Langban!" the kuts replied with laughs. "My God, an old man forgets the day while you, young chaps count the day!" he shouted with a smile. "Where the hell-storm?" he said with a smile. "Sanakhwa Jilla gets the season's heaviest hail-storms!" he added again with a smile in the darkness "like the season's rains first hit the Thangjing hills or the Koubru hills or the Marjing hills, it tells the direction where the rain would break upon."

In the darkness of night, sounds of hoofs were heard on the road near the gate of the Leitong sanggai and the two horses stood near the Senapati's gate. "Prince Angousana and Jilla," the two shadowy riders said to the sentry, "what is your name, sentry?" "Meechao Lallup, Sanakhwa," the sentry said in the darkness, "your slave. No need to ask and just ride up to the courtyard." Both rode past the gate. A lighted lantern was on the verandah to give a green signal and both dismounted near the verandah and paced towards the bed-room of the Senapati.

"Yambung, have you heard?" Angousana said with a subdued tone, "that all our brothers will be arrested in the darbar tomorrow?"

"Sit down on the chair first, and why you tell me!" the Senapati said with anxiousness flickering in his eyes "for what reasons, tell me."

"On charges of conspiracy to overthrow the Maharajah," said Angousana with beady eyes.

"Who told you so, Angousana?" the Senapati said quickly.

"The Sagol Hanjaba!" Angousana said abruptly under the flickering eyes, "and the Yubarah was summoned to the chamber of the Maharajah and was told by Srijut to swear that our camp does not conspire to overthrow him by swearing upon my dead father, touching his secret shoes and the state silver sword!"

"What did he say?" the Senapati said looking at his face.

"What he will say, he knows nothing!" came the reply.

"How tenuous the relationship between the step-brothers and this four years' span of time is a short time and presents itself like a graffito! Oh, my departed father, Sir Chandrakirti, Thou seest all, I never intend to wrest the gaddi from the Maharajah but I am compelled to do so! But I never shall sit on the gaddi. Yambung Kullachandra shall sit on the gaddi!" said the Senapati biting his lips.

"Yambung, better die than be arrested and thrown into the prison. We shall be exposed on the execution-grounds near the China-brick bridge or the Wangkhei-pungjao or Wangthongbung or elsewhere!" Jilla said falling on the Senapati's knees.

"Where is Chaobhal? Bring him here and wake him from his barrack! Where is Tonu Subedar! Where is Meechao Lallup?"

cried out the Senapati and he hastily scribbled a letter on the table "Angousana, be ready. All your kuts should be battle-ready and Jilla, you too!"

Within a few moments, Chaobhal stood before the Senapati kneeling before him quite sleepy who said "Sanakhwa, I am here!"

"Have you slept, Chaobhal?" said the Senapati as he folded the letter, "No man should see you and no man should inquire you about your destination and if anybody stops you on the way, you should hack him to pieces, mind that you deliver this letter to the Yubarajah and take a letter from him."

Chaobhal bowed before the Senapati and left the room. All the three princes looked at him as he walked out of the room. They waited the reply as they sat supporting their backs on the backs of the sofas.

"Angousana and Jilla, listen! If the Yubarajah says yes, it is well and good! And if he says no, we storm the palace just after midnight, mind that. I fix time after mid-night and give instructions to your kuts to dress up and arm themselves and my kuts about two hundred have already been briefed for an assault somewhere," the Senapati said as he rose from the chair and he dressed himself with his battle dress.

"What about the top khanna, Yambung?" Jilla said looking at the Senapati quite anxiously.

"The Senapati and the Top Garod and the top khanna are one and the same, and they are in my own grip. Jilla, have you forgotten that I am the Commander-in-Chief," replied the Senapati.

"What about the Maharajah's kuts and royal guards?" Jilla asked anxiously.

"All left after the Yubarajah's swearing in on the state silver-sword and my departed father's shoes. Srijut had released all," said the Senapati as he put his green hilt sword in the belt.

The hour stroke twelve in the quarter-guard at the residency. All listened quietly, and waited the letter from the Yubarajah anxiously.

CHAPTER VII

Shots of rifles rent in the stillness of the seventh day of the Langban, bullets whizzed in the darkness and a pandemonium broke out in the fort-palace when it was wrapped in slumber. The rebels headed by Prince Angousana, the Dolairoi Hanjaba took the palace by storms by scaling the palace wall and along with him his brother, Prince Jilla secretly entered into the fort and threatened all the kuts at the Sebok chaksang not to oppose. They aimed the gun at the bed-room of the Maharajah and poured fire in the direction and rushed towards the Zenana mahal.

The bullets hit the thick teak doors and awoke the Maharajah from slumber by the sound who sprung with the silver sword in his hand. He said, "The obstinate brothers have taken us by surprise, Oh, Lord Govinda You have ordained all this, pity it was, all guns and ammunition kept in the armoury after the parley with the treacherous Yubarajah, Oh, Lord Govinda, I saw you with darkened face in my dream and the temple engulfed in a towering fire, the Yubarajah swore by holding the silver sword of my father in his teeth and touching the shoes of my father, what is all this, Premamayee? The brutes have entered into my palace. Don't they fell awe at Sir Chandrakirti's curse, hell visits the dynasty who defy his curse! the brutes!"

Maharani Premamayee picked up a thick woolen shawl and scuttled in the bed-room without any slippers and scrambled in the Maharajah's chamber fumbling for the keys of the strong room, and she stood quite shocked jiggling the keys in her shaking hands..Bullets crashed on the window panes and entered into his bed-room and went through the turban of the Maharajah carrying off a piece of the head-gear.

"Hare Govinda, they intend to shoot me, be quick Premamayee, it is the will of Lord Govinda. He does not wish me to serve Him My time is over now!" Maharajah Surchandra cried with ravings of a mad man; one bullet landed on the wall again. He said almost shouting, "Where is Pakka, who will give the message, where are the kuts, sentries, lallup chingbas? So much ill-timed," He took the pistol from the Maharani and they left the bed-room quietly.

"Pakka will rescue the Maharajah with his retinues," Maharani Premamayee said in whispering tones with her legs quivering in fear. Kulei Keirungba and Lairen, the Lallup chingba came with drawn swords and guarded the Maharajah.

"But how they will fight in the darkness of the night, on this day of nastachandra, no Maharani, hurry up, and let us leave the throne to the sinners who had rebelled against my departed father, hurry up, hurry up, the Maharajah whispered to her, and he turned to one kut who followed him and said, "Don't shoot unless they fire on us." In the dark-night, the Maharajah and Premamayee walked along the long corridor towards the exit door on the south; at the door on the southern wall some kuts bowed without a word and the Maharajah hinted to them to escort him. Sounds of boots running on the paved floor of Sangai-mang broke the silence of the night. The September gusts whined among the pine and the silver-oak trees.

"Yambung, Yambung, Prince Jilla whispered to Prince Angousana in the darkness on the verandah of the Sebak Chakshang, "I shot at a shadow through the window of the Maharajah and I feared he was shot dead in his bed room."

"Are you sure, Jilla," Prince Angousana replied in whisper, "You give a covering fire and I dashed towards his bed-room and let us see how the Maharajah is enjoying sweet dreams!"

"Let us break open this big door and see who is inside? Is it the room?" Prince Jilla said as he pushed the door with his shoulders; they broke open the door.

"No, where is he? Escaped! Yambung Maharajah has just escaped through the back door! Chase him!" Angousana said with alacrity.

The Maharajah's sentries ran away and no opposition came from the retinues of the Maharajah. Jilla and Angousana rushed towards the escape-door of the palace on the southern side. The night was pitch dark save the endless expanse of the starry sky; the faint light of the lamps on the roads caught the white shawls of Maharajah Surchandra and the Maharani running from the palace with their children. Stray shots of pistols and rifles were only the sounds that disturbed the palace wrapped in the darkness. Deadly silence followed after the shot-out. Jilla shoved the cartridge in the rifle and chased the shadow with a sloping rifle towards

the receding figures in the darkness. He was about to overtake the shadowy figures and he put down his rifle and cocked it and aimed at them.

"Don't level your barrel, the Maharajah is proceeding to the temple!"

A voice cried in the darkness of the night and both the princes stood frozen on the cobbled road and looked around; a strong arm took the barrel and put the barrel down.

"I am the Senapati!" cried the voice.

"Yambung, we are here, the Maharajah has just escaped, everything is in our favour by the grace of Lord Govinda," the two princes said in excitement. "But where are the armoury and the big cannon?"

"They are within our hands," Chaobhal said with subdued tones and shouted, "Senapati ki fate huya! Senapati ki fate huya!" This was followed by hundred of his followers from the direction of the Top Guard, the Bajhai-loi-shang, Ras mandal and the bushes near the Paonam hidden; all shouted in unison reverberating in the darkness of the night.

"But where is Jubarajah Kullachandra?" Prince Jilla cried out in bewilderment.

Shouts and cries were heard at the far end of the palace. The rebels and prisoners had been released by the new rebels; Paona Brajabashi and all the followers and mercenaries of the old revolts would raise their swords against Maharajah Surchandra like all king-makers.

"Yambung! what is all this! The throne has been left to the rebels, I am Prince Pakka, the Sagol Hanjaba, all our brothers have come to fight for you, Yambung, let us return to our palace, the palace is our own, our birth-right! Nobody could wrest it from us by force, please see what Pakka could do! I will slash and cut the necks of all the rebels, be he anybody, let us return to the palace!" Prince Pakka he sought the Maharajah, as he fell at his feet to give his sanction to fight back their enemy.

The sentries at the southern gate watched quite helpless and some other lallups rose from their beds in the stillness of the night and gathered at the southern gate.

"Pakka, dear brother, please, for Heaven's sake, don't fight,

abandon your arms and let us leave this palace and the throne to the obstinate brothers who have just broken their pledge to Sir Chandrakirti, these brutes betrayed us, you see, fighting now is impossible, it is night, how could you fight back because of the darkness of the night enveloping the palace and everybody is taking his slumber. Who could scan the enemy or friend, so many adherents, any fight in the darkness would spill more blood," Maharajah Surchandra said with tears moistening his eyes out of disappointment and shock.

"You, Pakka, the Yubarajah came to my room last evening and swore by holding Sir Chandrakirti's shoes and by holding his sword between his teeth that he would never wage a revolt against me, no sepoys were detailed for our security only because I trusted that Yubarajah; now these brutes have rebelled nearly killing me in my own bed-room, let them take the throne," Surchandra cried with tears in his eyes.

"No, Pakka, let us retire to the residency for this night and decide what to act next, no, no, I am almost in a shock," Maharajah Surchandra said again almost with tears.

Prince Pakka almost broke down and cried "Oh, full of repentance, oh such things happen to-day!"

"Come, Pakka, our time is now over! Let us leave this hellish palace, full of hatred, and jealousy and intrigues!"

The Maharajah mounted on the black horse of Prince Pakka and the Maharani on another horse; the Sagol Hanjaba followed them behind on a horse with his retainers of eighty kuts towards the Nambul bridge and he looked straining his eyes in the darkness towards the sounds of the sporadic shots inside the palace with his long pistol aiming towards the palace-wall. He saw the kuts moving on her outer wall of the palace leisurely without intention to fire upon them. The evacuees marched along the dusty road under the threat of volley of fire from the outer walls of the palace.

The escapees crossed the Nambul bridge in the darkness of the night and went to Kangabam Leikai and took shelter in a house; the Maharajah held a darbar to chalk out the next move; he told his brother-in-law, Ibaingang Chawbi Singh and Moni Lal Dey to go to the residency to apprise the Political Agent of the situations.

Prince Pakkasana, the Lieutenant General and his brothers paced up and down on the court-yard of the house quite restless; he looked at his watch but it was about three O'clock in the morning; that September night was chilly and the starry sky enveloped the stillness of the night.

Cannon boomed and boomed; the usual signal to recall all the lallups and kuts from their homes to the palace. The rebels had occupied the palace and the throne was left vacant.

Ibaingang Chawbi Singh and Moni Lal Dey spoke in Hindustani to the sentries at the quarter guards at the northern gate of the residency who challenged the emissaries. "Emissary from His Highness! The Maharajah of Manipur, was driven out of the palace in the dead of night by his brothers, the Senapati and the Yubarahaj, we want to see the Agent!" Moni Lal Dey said in Hindustani. They were allowed entry into the residency under heavy armed escorts to the residency.

Sounds of rifles broke the silence of the night; the flying foxes rustled among the tall mango trees in the residency compound.

Grimwood and Ethel had been awoken from the sleep by Dumbro Singh, the Band master and they went out to meet the emissaries.

"Agent Saheb, emissaries from Maharajah Surchandra," Chawbi said with a salaam, and he gave a chit to the Agent, "this message from the Mahajarah," Grimwood took the message from him in a haste and scanned it under a pressure lamp and he looked up to Chawbi and said, "Who are firing, Chawbi?"

"The Senapati! Your Excellency, the Maharajah is seeking protection from you, Agent aheb. He is, at present resting at the Kangabam Leikai with his retinues," he said.

"How could it be that the Senapati is firing! The Senapati is not a lunatic, having better head than the rest of the brothers, those princes, tell me who are firing in the fort?" Grimwood said in Hindustani.

Chawbi stared on the Agent's face and stood like a frightened rat shaking his legs.

A sudden commotion rose from the fort; "Durga Mai ki jai, Durga Mai ki jai! Senapati Ki Jai, Senapati Ki Jai", the rebels shouted inside the fort and Grimwood strained his ears to listen

to war cry. Ethel stood in her sleeping gown shaking her chin in the chilly morning night. By the time pandemonium almost ruled the palace.

With clatter of horse hooves, Prince Pakka came with Moni Lal Dey following him behind and said, "Good morning, Agent Saheb," and he shook hands with Grimwood.

"Could you help me, Prince who are firing?" Grimwood said in a quivering voice.

Pakkasana said nothing.

"The Senapati!" said the prince, "His Highness the Maharajah Surchandra has also come to your residency for protection."

"Of course, it is better to confirm who are firing, Prince, when I send the telegraphic message to the Chief Commissioner," Grimwood said calmly and led them to the waiting-room.

"Please send one recce to the precincts of the palace, Prince for confirmation and anybody ready?" he continued. At this Moni Lal Dey left the residency on his horse for the fort; but who could collect the intelligence during the melee amidst flying bullets. Everybody was in a shooting spree. He returned within some minutes and reported that the fort could not be approached during the shooting spree in the crisp early morning; last week of September brought dews and fog in the early hours of the morning; only the occasional spurts of firing gave a telltale of the grim happening in the fort; the lallups jumped up from their beds with the last kiss of their children and wives. Hell, they cried in anguish; the king-maker, what the hell, these princes drive at? They cursed who started the game of death. To death, kick arse, they swore at them.

Mr. Grimwood and Ethel went out to meet the Maharajah and his Maharani and said, "Good morning, Your Highness, welcome, please don't be scared; the Gurkhas had already been marching from the cantonment towards the residency in case of any eventuality and more could be got down from Kohima in four or five days." To this, the Maharajah wore a wry face and denied any comfort. Ethel ushered in the Maharajah and Maharani in the darbar-hall and lighted the hall.

"Your Highness, any course of action? Of course, the fort and the palace could be recovered in no time, detachment from

Langthabal had duly been informed," Grimwood quipped out.

"Agent Sahib, I come here for assistance and advice," the Maharajah said in a shaky voice with trembling legs. The cold wind of late September came through the latticed windows of the darbar-hall. Prince Pakka threw himself on the sofa with his hand supporting his weary head. The event of the cold September night haunted his memory. Of course, it was a piquant situation, he said with froaths at the corners of his mouth; with a personal guard of eighty, how could he recover the palace? The Yubarajah had three hundred personal bodyguards, the Senapati two hundred, Prince Angousana eighty and Prince Jilla sixty he thought eyeing the event of a possible battle with the rebels; the scenes danced in his eyes; sweat trickled from beneath the tight silk turban. With clank of spurs and rifles Lt. Berkeley arrived at the residency from Langthabal garrison with twenty-five riflemen and reported to the Political Agent.

Prince Pakkasana was seized with disappointment and privation within such a short period and he found the ground receding from his feet. He felt that the palace lay a few yards from the precincts of the residency. Only one dusty road and a shallow moat lay between the palace and the residency. But now the palace is far from him by thousands of miles, he said to himself. He looked quite agitated, and he said calling one royal kut "Come here, last night we left the palace but was there no lallup or kut who had had the latest compunction for Srijut? You come here only to-day and this shows that you went through the last night's battle!"

"Sanakhwa, many wanted to die for Srijut but there was no man to lead us last night. Only Pitamber came out in his battle dress shouting 'No single hair of Srijut could be touched, I die before my guru, preceptor dies' and brandishing swords in his hands, he shouted in front of the Top Garod. The Senapati subdued him and wrested the swords and his kuts dragged him to the alter of the two dragons for execution. Had not other princes intervened he might have another life. He was set free. But he shouted "Give the white garland, the garland for death!" He was led away.

Pakka looked towards the palace walking near the gate but he found the swarms of kuts sitting on the wall with rifles on their laps. He could not look at the scene and he felt himself choked

with emotion and turned his face. He saw a group of riders coming towards the northern gate of the residency. He paced towards the bangalow on the carriage-drive with his hand gripping his pistol. He found that the dawn came quite un-noticed during the tangled skein of events; retinues of the old king streamed inside the residency, Prince Thambousana, and Prince Gopalsana rode with General Thangal and Col. Shamu inside the residency; other majors, Dhalaraj, Jambhuban Singh and a cohort of ministers followed the suit. The force mustered at the residency compound numbered about two thousand of which six hundred were properly armed and all ready for recovery of the fort and the palace. Prince Pakkasana with his eyes almost in tears shook hands with the ministers and the generals.

"Maja Ibungo, Lt. General Pakka, when to recover the fort?" Moirang Atonjao said.

"Just waiting orders to attack from the Maharajah."

"Maja Ibungo, we've just a large following, hope we could make our Maharajah enter the palace with success."

"With God's grace, oh, sons of the soil."

"Prince Pakkasana inspected the followers who gathered at the residency. His eyes focussed towards the flurry of hoofs.

A rider trotted towards the residency through the multitude of sepoys and dismounted near the end of the carriage-drive; nobody noticed that the rider was Dassu Sardar, the Muslim photographer who came to deliver a message to the Political Agent; nobody could differentiate between the followers of the two warring rivals. The alarm sounded as the usual five cannon shots were fired;

"But this Muslim photographer is talking to the Agent saheb in whispered tones. But, who could see all that in this multitude?" said somebody whispering to a by-stander.

"Oh, that bearded man, who took photos of the princesses in the palace, I saw him many times in the palace," said a lallup standing near him.

Hardly had the Muslim rider left the residency on horse back towards the palace, Lt. Berkeley had sent his force and collected all the rifles from the followers of the Maharajah. "But why without arms how could we fight? What does the Agent

saheb says? Let us hear; where he will keep all these shot-guns we took from the palace but that young chap Engrez soldier, perhaps a major disarms all our men? Where is the Shagol Hanjaba, now Commander-in-chief of this force, Oh, without arms how he'll win a big battle against the Yubarajah", said one standing near him with an ironical tone.

"Capt. Berkeley's disarming of the retinues of the Maharajah as well as of the royal sepoy's coming to help the latter had frustrated any encounter with the Senapati's victorious rebels; all the arms were stowed away in the corner of the residency verandah; what message the Muslim photographer brought to Mr. Grimwood was the most unconvincing and this mystery was heightened by the telegraphic message from the Chief Commissioner of Assam to Mr. Grimwood. The contents of the telegraph message was never revealed to the Maharajah nor did he render any assistance to him in such a precarious situation. General Thangal and Col. Shamu requested the Maharajah to enter the palace; but how could he believe them. It might be only lip-services; the Senapati and his brothers had already seized all the cannon and armoury.

A country must not be left without a ruling king, the people began to express their grivances; there must be a king; the Sanakeithel was also already deserted. Now people clamoured for a new Maharajah.

His pitched voice struck like a lightening hit. It was the nail on the Maharajah's head; his head reeled and starlets like swarms of glow-worms dazed him in his eyes and he stood quite unconsciously and saw the scene like a nightmare. "Pakka, come here, I don't see any reason to stay here any longer, be ready, let us vacate this darbar-hall and proceed to Silchar," said the Maharajah as he sank on the sofa. "Yambung, what the hell this Agent saheb is up to? Dassu Sardar, the Muslim photographer came to this residency and had a secret talk with the Agent Saheb and then started this disarming of the Maharajah's sepoy and other followers who came here to fight for you," said Prince Pakka, his eyes red with anger.

The Maharajah went to the door and saw Grimwood talking to the sepoy's in broken Manipuri, "You keep your arms in the verandah here; a huge crowd just waiting to fight in the residency compound is not necessary, you are under the protection of the British sarkar."

"Grimwood sahib, what is all this, you are disarming my soldiers who came here to fight for me?" said the Maharajah in a grave voice.

Mr. Grimwood looked back to the Maharajah and went towards him talking to Lt. Berkeley, "Lieutenant, stow all their arms in the corner of the verandah and let us talk later."

"What's all this, Agent saheb," said the Maharajah with anger in his eyes. Prince Pakkasana and other princes stood, their hands on the hilts of swords with tight lips.

"Your Highness, the arms will be returned to you later, had there been a fight at this juncture, the small force in the residency will not be able to restrain them," said Mr. Grimwood with peremptoriness in his voice.

"But Your Excellency, do you receive any information or orders from the Chief Commissioner of Assam?" asked Prince Pakkasana with his lips almost quivering in a breathless voice, "Your Excellency, how long do telegraphs take time to come to Manipur from Shilong or Silchar, you say telemesssage was wired to Shillong yesterday but it's already eleven O'clock in the morning. No order for assistance from the Chief Commissioner!"

Prince Pakka sank in the chair quite helpless with his head resting on his hand; Prince Thambousana raced up and down in the room.

"No definite orders from the Chief Commissioner, Prince Pakka, no action could be taken without his clearance," said Mr. Grimwood with signs of helplessness in his eyes staring in confusion. Prince Pakka said, "Everything slips from us." With his eyes almost closing he continued "That means no action could be taken without his orders."

"Yes, Prince!"

"A message from the Yubarajah?" cried Prince Thambousana almost in a frenzy, and he took the letter from the messenger and he rushed to the Maharajah with Prince Pakka following behind him. Both said in exasperation, "A message from the Yubarajah, Yambung Maharajah?"

"See, what is that, Pakka?"

"Shree charana kamalashu, Thy servant had no complicity in the revolt; am staying at Phoiing. I will attend you when Shreejut

enters the palace "

"Send words to my younger brother, Yubarajah that I have left the throne to him, go and enter into the palace and rule the country and don't dishearten me," said the Maharajah almost in disappointment.

"Pakka, send the silver-sword to the Senapati with a message that I have made a formal abdication to the throne of Manipur and write to him also that I now plan to pass the rest of my life at Sri Sri Brindabana and also send the money I left yesterday, a sum of ten thousand takas and fifty and two hundred tola-gold tobacco pipe and make him sure that I make a safe passage to Sri Brindabana," said the Maharajah in a shaky voice, "and if my next brother becomes the next Maharajah after me, I fulfill my duty to the trust made by my departed father, Sir Chandrakirti on his dead-bed!"

The Maharajah's words stunned all his brothers who looked at him in total dismay. It seemed as if all the sounds and bustles that filled the crowded residency compound became still and even the heart missed one beat at the stark revelation of the Maharajah's last wish. It gave an electric shock to Pakka's heart and made him gasp for breaths. Through the windows of the darbar hall, the morning light flooded and danced with ripples on the scimitar-shaped lake and the white cranes waddled on the bank quite unconcerned.

The black dhoti-clad lallups and kuts who waited at the entrance of the carriage-drive and on the verandah of the residency became too tired and became seething with uncertainties. "A tough proposition to recover the fort-palace from the Senapati," said one kut to another fellow, "whom to side with, it's all the same to us, all brothers, sons of the same, old dear Maharajah!" "Is it not a fratricidal war," said another kut sitting next to him, "who will face the Senapati, and his brothers but the present Maharajah had been on the gaddi for three or four years and his saintly brother, the Yubarajah may be given a chance, such is the ways of the princes." "Stop talking loudly, hell, who are those coming on horses," said the other kut.

Moirang Atonjao and half a dozen riders entered the northern gate of the residency and dismounted near the end of the carriage-drive.

"Perhaps, the message from the Senapati," said the kut in a whispered tone cupping his hands before his mouth.

"Just wait," said the kut.

The messenger was ushered in the darbar-hall who came to deliver a letter to the Maharajah; he fell prostrate before the latter who sat reclining on the sofa out of sheer exhaustion, "What made you, Moirang Atonjao to come over here," came the hot words from Surchandra.

"Maharajah, I am your slave forever, coming to deliver a letter to Srijut from the Senapati," said Atonjao wiping the tears from his eyes and face with his chaddar, and he handed over the letter to him bending his head.

"Pakka, read this letter to me," said the Maharajah to the prince who stood by his side. The prince took the letter and read with his eyes jutting out to scan the letters; the handwriting was, of course, the Senapati's own which was so familiar, and he went over the message. "The Most High in Dignity, Srila Sri Panchojukta Manipureshwar with millions of obeisances to the feet auspicious and lucky . I make myself acquainted with all the directions and Raj Aggya contained therein I will take the necessary steps to ensure safe arrival at Sridham Braja. Forgive us, who are dependents, the offences committed at the feet of the Srijut Maharajah. The present incident must be taken as the most improbable of all improbabilities." Sak 1812. After reading the letter, the prince placed the same on the table and sank on the chair resting his head on his hands.

"Pakka, call General Thangal, I give my last words to him, where is the general?" inquired the Maharajah, "tell him it is no use to cry over the spilt milk."

The general and the prince emerged from the inner door of the adjacent room and knelt before the Maharajah and said, "Any command, I'm still Thy slave."

"Ipu General, I am retiring to Sri Brindabana and I left the gaddi to the Yubarajah and please see that the welfare of the country and of my brothers are ensured", said the Maharajah in a shaky voice.

The shadow of disappointment was so manifest in the darbar hall that nothing was heard save the muffled steps of the princes

on the carpet-floor; all the princes huddled themselves up in the corner of the hall around Maharajah Surchandra who denied to take a single drop of water in the British residency because of religious scruples, and black and shadowy smudges appeared under his eyelids. Within so short span of time, he wore an emaciated and soul-less self against the back-drop of profound silence and uncertainty in the residency.

Prince Pakka rose from the chair with a jerk and paced towards the threshold of the darbar-hall and leaned on the door by his hand, and saw the kuts and the lallups sitting under the leafy mango trees and some lying on the neat lawn. The prince paced to and fro in the hall without a word.

"Pakka, call the Agent saheb here, I can't stay here even a single moment and I have decided to go to Silchar this afternoon and I'll give him this information and no more, only that I am proceeding to Sri Brindabana via Silchar, but Pakka, I left the palace without a single taka in my purse, how shall I undertake such a long journey and at present I don't know, Hare Govinda, Thou hast ordained everything, what crime have I committed in Thy name!" said the Maharajah wiping the mist from his eyes by a chaddar, and he threw himself on the back of the chair in an anguished and restless mood.

Prince Pakka left the hall towards the living room of Mr. Grimwood on the carpet-verandah in a slow and measured walk; every step bore the stamp of blighted hopes. The prince and Mr. Grimwood appeared before the Maharajah in no time and later Ethel joined her husband.

"Agent saheb, now I have decided to abdicate in favour of Yubarajah Kullachandra and I will retire to Sri Brindabana and pass the rest of my life there. I will leave the residency for Silchar in the afternoon," said Maharajah Surchandra in a grave and heavy voice, "now it seems quite futile to pass a single moment at this place."

"Your Highness, why abdicate so hastily! Troops will come if you are bent on recovering the palace," pleaded the young Political Agent in his nasab tone.

"Agent saheb, it is needless to fight now," said the Maharajah as he turned his face away from the young Agent.

"But Agent saheb, you've disarmed my sepoy at the most

crucial moment at the biddings of the Senapati," quipped Pakka to the young Agent.

"No, Pakka, please stop all this," said the Maharajah restraining his brother.

"No, Sagol Hengeba, you may collect all the arms if you are willing to fight," came the sudden reply from Mr. Grimwood who raised both hands to convince in Hindustani.

"Well, Agent saheb, everything is over now!" the Maharajah said in an excited voice, "no cry over the spilt milk."

"Your Highness," said the Agent.

"Well, Agent saheb, please do me a favour, I will leave Manipur for Silchar in the afternoon this very day and please convey this information to the Senapati and request him to make my passage to the pilgrimage safe and arrange everything for the same and if he say yes, I start this very evening," said the Maharajah in an affected tone.

"Your Highness, please think over and don't make a hasty decision," Mr. Grimwood said in a tight lipped tone, and he rose from the chair and left towards his study.

News of abdication spread like wild fires and all the adherents, young and old as well as house-wives in white chaddars and phaneks waited outside the residency to make offers in mites and silver takas to the deposed Maharajah who intended to live in recluse at Brindabana. Princess Sanatombi almost ran out of breaths to have a glimpse of her father and threw herself on his feet and could not raise her face mourning over her father's fate.

"Dearie, Sanaombi, don't let tears fell on the ground, it's no good, you are young and aspire to be wealthy and prosperous in future, raise your face and I say a few words to you," said the Maharajah in broken words. "You see I could not complete the marriage ceremonies of your younger sisters, Sana Phandeng, Khomdon and Ombisana when I was here, and you see to it."

Princess Sanatombi rose from the floor wiping her tears saying, "Pabungkhwa, please leave everything to me."

"And Sanatombi, you also look after Prince Lukhoisana who is young and immature in the ways of world."

A small crowd gathered on the bank of the Nambul river waiting to pay farewell to the deposed king. They fell prostrate

before the deposed Maharajah wiping tears from their eyes. Mr. Grimwood and Ethel came to the scene and bade, "Good-bye, Your Highness and Your Royal Highness Prince Pakka and other princes, wish you a happy journey." The sepoys from the cantonment at Langthabal escorted the party.

The autumn dusk wrapped the town and the evening saw a kingless land on that day. A kingless land, the people would not tolerate because they had bitter memories of the Seven Years' Burmese occupation of the land. Prince Tekendrajit, the rebel chief sent Prince Angousana, and General Thangal to Yubarajah Kullachandra's retreat at Phoijing to enter the palace in a triumphal march with his retinues and ascend the throne of Manipur.

A saintly Yubarajah showed his lackadaisical attitude to the offer of the throne and did not like to mix in the day-to-day rough and tumble of worldly affairs. "But, no throne should be left vacant, Yubarajah," pleaded General Thangal, "all princes, sons of Sir Chandrakirti should become the Maharajahs according to the line of succession as desired by him."

"General, my next brother, Tekendrajit Bir Singh, the Senapati may be given the gaddi, I would like to relinquish my claim to it and now I intend to live in exile for, Ipu General, I dare not incur the displeasure of my dead father," said the Yubarajah in an animated tone

"But, Yubarajah, Maharajah Surchandra abdicated the gaddi in your favour! And he has left Manipur for Sri Brindabana. No throne should be left vacant even for a day," pleaded the old general, "oh, son of the great king, this day passes without a king and next day, the people will clamour for a new king. Be our father, our guide and our Maharajah to bring prosperity and wealth in the land, drive out poverty from the land and make the tears of the widows vanish from their eyes."

On the next day, Yubarajah Kullachandra entered the fort-palace with his retinues and he was greeted by the Senapati at the western gate with a broad smile and the people waiting at the gate fell prostrate on the ground before the new Maharajah. With the flourish of cannon, the new regime ushered in a new era; Moirang Atonjao and other dignitaries rushed towards the residence of the Yubarajah and requested his consort to join the new Maharajah in the palace.

The Grimwoods busied themselves with the despatches of the telegraphic messages to the Chief Commissioner at Silchar; Kundu, the private secretary shuttled between the Telegraph office and the residency; Beikunthanath, the signaller tapped and tapped dots and dashes to Silchar for the Chief must be kept abreast of anything happening at the fort-palace. With a long feather pen, Grimwood scribbled on the yellow paper in his study that the Yubarajah was aloof from both sides and he could be tipped for the gaddi and that he had sent an escort of 41 rifles and also insisted on Prince Pakkasana's going being the primary cause of all trouble. Of course, the new Maharajah had unseated four princes including Prince Pakkasana whose soul never rested until he had caused to exile the Senapati, and he would hang up the fiddle in the royal darbar at the sight of the latter. The recent coup d'etat decimated almost all the princes in the royal darbar; better argue with four princes rather than eight.

But the quiddity of the recent revolt was that it passed off without causing a mild flutter in the beginning. Many an uprising Manipur had witnessed but the palace revolt of 1890 was a mere repetition and a mere ditto!

Grimwood wrote on the paper driving his feather pen up and down in oblique italics, the new king was a ditto of the Senapati, now the Yubarajah who could act nothing save on the advice of his younger brother. The people accepted the change of rulers without a demur. They dreamt of land without threats of war and the absence of the wailings of the widows and countryside vibrant with musics of mridangas and bell-metals.

Ethel sat near her husband correcting the draft and watched him biting her lower lips saying, "Frank, better deal with four father than eight, pretty good number, quite popular with the people and least friction in the darbar and they professed to do much for the subjects!"

Grimwood looked at her quite amused at her words and said, "Pretty good companions and hope this regime lasts till our posting from this station!"

"But Frank, would the Governor-General give sanction to the Regent's ascension?" said Ethel to her husband with her hand smoothing her hairs.

"Why, it is a bloodless coup, and the throne was occupied by

his next brother after his formal abdication and the country, I tell you, appears to have acquiesced willingly in the change of rulers and now everything is quite and orderly", said Grimwood in a serious mood.

"But, Frank, think of the many letters that you sent earlier, the Senapati has more than once incurred the displeasure of the Government!" said Ethel.

"But, he has a better head than that of the other princes! He is popular amongst all classes, the only prince who makes himself poor owing to his generosity," said Grimwood dropping his feather pen.

Ethel rose from her chair and looked through the latticed window towards the garden where roses and heliotropes bloomed. Said she, "The Senapati did not join the overthrow and the Ex-Maharajah did not have the guts to brave the matter out and his fear of the Senapati overcame all other things." She mused looking in the void and said abruptly, "Did the Senapati put on jovial look when you called on him." Grimwood raised his face and looked at her quite surprised.

After a week, everything became calm and peaceful; the Sanakeithel appeared gay and merry with striped draperies of ladies. Ethel rode her Arabian horse to the residence of Prince Tekendrajit who became the Yubarajah and had an evening ride along the Iril river and through the green sheets of paddy-fields.

Ethel had slept quite tired after the evening ride; on that evening she had gone too far and took rest at an isolated saban, a beautiful wooded piece of land amidst the green paddy-fields. She broke up her sleep and grouped in the darkness of the night in her bed-room whispering to herself, "I don't know why the cross on Heath's memorial tomb haunts me not only in dreams but also in the broad day-light, it scares me so much, his marble monument laughs like Satyr, the Greek woodland deity in the moon-light and hell, who put it on my view from my bed-room!"

Grimwood had just retired to his bed-room, and Ethel slammed the windows saying "Oh, dearie Heath, sleep well with Major Trotter in the moon-light that never wanes nor waxes." She sat on the chair and listened to the howling of jackals near her bed-room and said, "Ghosh, what an unlucky place Manipur is!"

Next week followed with Grimwoods' visit to Kohima, a hilly

station with bracing weather, eighteen miles from Mao, the hill station at the northern border of Manipur. They spent four days' at the station riding on the narrow lanes and curves of the dusty roads. They sang carols during the Christ-mas. They called on the Quintons and invited them to their residency at Imphal. The Grimwoods were on a holiday spree after mending the fences and the people became quite happy at the change of rulers, and the old Maharajah. Prince Tekendrajit who became the Yubarajah became active in upliftment of the welfare of the people; more bridges and roads were constructed and sign of discord among the princes was ruled out. No sons of ministers nor princes were seen engaging in pigeon-fights on the highway.

Prince Jilla, the youngest prince who sent a bullet through the silk turban of Ex-Maharajah was holding the office of the Shamu Hanjaba and he attended the darbar quite regularly putting on a jovial face.

After return from the hill station of Kohima, the Grimwood left for Tammu, the hot town at the border of Burma, they rode under the creeper-hanging and orchid-bearing trees; they visited pagodas with the myouk on a bay pony. Tammu, a small town amidst purple plain appeared gay with cigar-smoking ladies, silk and Chinese fans. The young couple surprised Lt. Grant in his bachelor's army tent and had army ration with him in his barrack. With bagful of orchids, they wended on the slopes of hills on horse hide good-bye. "Lt. Grant, so long, so far from any sort of civilization, have a good time with us at the residency at Imphal, enjoy duck-shooting at the Logtak lake, and so long, so long, Lt. Grant!"

On the way, Ethel said, "What shall the Government do at the next step if the present Maharajah is not recognised, and fear the Ex-Maharajah sent a memorial to the Viceroy denying his voluntary abdication?"

Her husband did not say anything but he was silent looking his eyes blank and the horse trotted on the hilly tract of Tengnoupal; the valley of Imphal was like a piece of the unbeaten gold, shining in the evening sunlight.

At Imphal, the residency had one caller in the dinner time; he was Lt. Simpson of the Gurkha rifles who came from Kohima; he handed over the bridle to his syce, Dhaniram and paced towards

the drawing-room of the residency. Little princesses visited the Grimwoods at the residency with Prince Tekendrajit; Mikoi and Leiren also accompanied the Princesses like the former days. The girls shied away at the presence of Lt. Simpson who lounged near the rose-garden. "Frank, your parlour maids," said the lieutenant with a smile to Grimwood who joined him in the garden. Yubarajah Tekendrajit and Ethel emerged from the drawing-room talking in Hindustani.

Ethel introduced the prince, "His Royal Highness, Yubarajah Tekendrajit Bir Singh." Lt. Simpson who rose from the chair and shook hands with him saying, "I see, Royal Highness." The young lieutenant said with a grunt and she looked up at his face on hearing his gruff voice but she found the prince smiling quite unconcerned as he threw himself on the chair opposite the new guest. Abdul Karim, the young lieutenant's khangsama served the table with black coffee and dry fruits; the prince declined the coffee and munched the dry fruits.

After a few minutes, Prince Tekendrajit left the table saying, "Lieutenant Saheb, have a good time here, have a duck-shooting at the Logtak lake some day; the last week of February brings the nicest game birds from all the countries, so and so long." The young lieutenant waved his hand with a smile.

"Am coming to see the damned military stores at the cantonment and all the troops left for China, the Dowager Queen is evicting all the legations in Peking," said Lt. Simpson as he sipped coffee.

"This winter no visitors turned up at this residency, quite bleak and forlorn, hell, who held up the visitors," Ethel lamented with a whining sigh, "Mr. Simpson, what about piano?"

"My God, a young uniform, an art-connoisseur!" exclaimed Grimwood, "I am unfortunate not to have a piano."

"Frank, I told you already, next time we bring a piano from Silchar and hold concerts in the residency," said Ethel.

"Ma'm, a piano finds no room in army barracks!" the young lieutenant said rocking his long legs. "I attended piano classes quite young and have passion for Bachs and Mozarts, dad wondered I could pick up them in so short time."

"Have you attended concerts, Lieutenant?" asked Grimwood.

"Of course not."

After coffee, Ethel and Lt. Simpson had an evening ride towards the hump bridge over the Nambul river and trotted along the bank. At dusk they returned at the residency and Ethel slipped in her evening dress in her room. The day, being Sunday, Ethel arranged a dinner for the young lieutenant; her cooks prepared shepherd's pie soups and salads in her kitchen. The pressure lamp lit her cosy room sucking in the mellow evening air; Moonia paced to and fro between the kitchen and Ethel's room with her sari tight on her waist.

Lt. Simpson played whist with the Grimwoods sipping vintage champagne; Ethel found the young lieutenant quite reticent unlike his former days in Shillong. "Perhaps, he is quite tired of the long journey from Kohima," Ethel thought in silence. The head-bearer knocked on the door and said. "Kundu, the private Secretary came with the telegram." He handed over the message to Grimwood. He opened the envelope and ran his eyes over it and said with a surprise, "Hey, the Chief is coming to Manipur." "When, Frank?" shouted Ethel and took the telegram from her husband. "Not mentioned in the message, simply he proposes to visit Manipur shortly. Have roads and rest-houses put in order. Further directions and dates to follow." Lt. Simpson pretended not to listen but absorbed in the cards and sipped champagne from the glass. "What the hell, he is up to here," Grimwood said rubbing his red thin hair above his ear with his finger, "is it the restoration question, ahem." He bumped on the chair and made a feeble sigh and said "and to announce in the darbar, hell, it will create lots of misapprehension in the palace."

After dinner, they retired to their bed-rooms.

"Frank, have you sent the orders for booking passage to England? Hope to land in England in summer," said Ethel to her husband, "I am a bit home-sick and have not seen England for the last three years."

"Yah, sent message to the shipping company already and date of sailing waits only to be confirmed," said Grimwood in reply, "and when the Chief is coming to Manipur, the two has mixed up and had to be confirmed later after his visit."

They slept late in the night, the thought of home-journey and the inexplicable telegram from the Chief Commissioner made the Grimwoods wide awake in the night.

One day later, Grimwood announced the approaching visit of Mr. Quinton, the Chief Commissioner in the darbar and this information seized the darbar with misapprehensions. "Please tell me when is the Kammeson saheb visiting Manipur," queried old General Thangal, "Agent Saheb, not for all what he will do here but for his befitting reception." He said nothing but hung his face in total ignorance; now and then he encountered almost all the princes with such questions.

Later, Tekendrajit visited the Grimwoods at the residency and said, "Memsahab, going to Belat and when?"

"Your Royal Highness, just thinking over visiting England and not been at home for the last three years" said Ethel in a mawkish manner.

Lt. Simpson joined them in the garden lounge sporting his service revolver on his finger whirling.

The prince left the residency a little later leaving the Grimwood in the garden who looked quite disenchanted. "Better leave this place and sail for England as early as possible to be out of danger in the event of anything serious happening," said Grimwood as if in a reverie.

"Of course, the date of sailing was already fixed but any postponement will now become quite difficult," said Ethel in reply, "because the princes and the old general look any move on our part as something scenting danger." She stared in the deep bluish sky and became silent.

"Leaving Manipur at this juncture would mean flying from the place of danger, and hell, these natives are so suspicious," said Grimwood with his eyes gazing blankly.

Mr. Melville also became a guest in the residency; he had just arrived on a pony from Kohima and after a few days' halt at Imphal, he had to leave for Moreh. He had to mend the telegraph lines before the arrival of the Chief Commissioner. Ethel's loneliness was partially lifted by his visit. Mr. O'Brien, his signaller accompanied him in the journey. Mr. Melville, a lame, was sobre like all his types.

Kali and some other attendants brought a basketful of fowls, snifes and teals from the lake with their legs tied in ropes hanging from a bamboo pole. With a salaam, Kali said, "From the

Yubarajah, Memsahab," and left the residency. On the way, he accosted Atomacha and Pitamber near the northern gate of the residency.

"How happy are the attendants of the new Yubarajah, Kali, and how is the Yubarajah?" said Pitamber heaving a sigh puffing up his chest. His face wore a wry smile.

"Not so happy as you were in the hey-day of the Sagol Hanjaba!" retorted Kali with a grin and walked past them." What the hell, this Pitamber is now in the pay-roll of the Sagol Hanjaba, lurking near the residency for intelligence for the old Maharajah and his back will be broken if the Yubarajah gets the scent of his complicity."

Mikoi played with Ethel in her room while the young lieutenant watched them talking to her. She spoke anything about the English customs from the English pickles to Ethel's trousseau. Mikoi sat near the young lieutenant and shuffled the thick photo-albums putting on her lap and listened to his overtures.

Grimwood was busy with the out-landish camera in the garden and the young girls. They posed for the snaps with a red rose on her ear and next came Leiren. "Where is Mikoi, where is that girl, that crazy one," they cried. Evening came without further delay, and they all mounted the palanquin. Mikoi came out of the young lieutenant's room with slow gaits who was accosted with angry shouts from the princesses. "Where have you been, you curly haired girl?" They all cried in anguish. Behind him walked the young lieutenant.

Ethel had two callers on the next morning; they were Yubarajah Tekendrajit and General Thangal. They had chit-chats in the drawing-room like all conversations with a house-wife. She noticed the unrest in the misty eyes of the old man which flickered under his over-hanging white eyebrows.

"General, you're quite healthy in your age," said Ethel looking at his filmy eyes.

"Memsahab, not only old but also very weak this year, I passed the last winter quite terribly," replied the old general, "but the old Maharajah, Sir Chandrakirti at his dying hours told me to look after all his princes, his dear sons, all precious to me." He cleared his throat with grunts, and became reticent for a few moment and peered at her eyes with misty eyes and said, "But,

to-day, I put one question to Memsahab, please don't leave it without an answer!" His eyes screwed and gazed on her face with his white eyebrows puckering and his mouth was agape like the parched mouth of a desert bird.

"Memsahab, when are you leaving Manipur for Belat?" asked the general to Ethel.

The straight question made her taken aback and she looked sullen and frowned at the old general quite unconsciously without a word. She becalmed herself and made a sardonic smile and said "General, Agent saheb has booked the passage to Belat and anything wrong?"

"But, Memsahab, if you are going to Belat, I pray, please sail for Belat as soon as the Commissioner has left Manipur, just a matter of two or three weeks," entreated the old general with his eyes scrutinising her reaction on her face.

Yubarajah Tekendrajit did not utter anything but kept himself engaged with something; his eyes lit up suddenly and shot up with a beaming smile.

"Memsahab, love of one's home is quite endearing like a mother's love!" said the prince and rose from his seat slowly.

The Yubarajah and the old general returned quite dejected.

Mr. Melville and Mr. O'Brien, the signaller left the residency after a few days' stay but they would join the Grimwood after their return from Moreh, the last station at the border of Manipur on the east. The approaching date of the Chief Commissioner's visit seized the darbar with uncertainty.

The darbar was held almost everyday in the palace; Yubarajah Tekendrajit, General Thangal, Col. Shamu and other ministers held discussions about the reception of the Chief Commissioner in a grand style; planting of plaintain plants at every gate, burning incense, earthen pots at every gate; the lallups should send the message on horse-backs to every village on the Dimapur road. The deposed Maharajah's petition to the Viceroy was much discussed in the darbar; was the Viceroy going to reinstate him on the gaddi? Bamon Charan Mukherjee, the royal clerk sent a number of memorials to the Viceroy addressing "My Honourable most beloved Friend." But the tragic thing was that the Viceroy was quite silent on the issue and all the communication between Manipur and Calcutta was snapped.

"Sanaton, let us start collection of all arms, muskets, smooth bores and anything that could be used in battles," cried out the old general to the Yubarajah.

The Yubarajah nodded in assent without a word. The lallup leaders went on foot to all villages for collection of all the guns from the civilians and they were deposited in the palace armoury.

"Of course, Maharajah Kullachandra is second in the line of succession to the gaddi of Manipur during Sir Chandrakirti's time," said the old general nodding his head in confidence, "but everything is in the darkness whether the Chief Commissioner would visit Manipur with the Ex-Maharajah and restore him on the gaddi?"

Ethel lamented quite helplessly; the regular supply of white atta, fowls, all the finest vegetables ceased to vend in the residency; all the job-holders in the residency began to huddle together in a corner and talk of the dark days ahead and some took French leaves. She cried out quite disappointed and she hastened to her husband's office to give the information but the head-bearer told her that her husband had already gone to the palace to attend the darbar. "The palace is arming to the teeth," she thought as she threw herself on a wooden chair and looked around and she heard the still life of the town throbbing with unpunctuated beats and she saw the peasants in workman's dhotis streaming towards the palace. This idea drove her into madness because it was quite incomprehensible. She paced towards Lt. Simpson's quarter in the residency but he had already gone to the cantonment to wind up his business. His inspection of the stores at the cantonment was already over and his stay at Imphal was almost nearly over, Mr. Melville and Mr. O'Brien might be on the way towards Imphal from Moreh.

At lunch, Ethel told her husband that the palace had started collection of muskets, smooth bores and any other lethal weapons. Lt. Simpson dropped his fork and knife and said, "My goodness, I like actions! Mr. Grimwood, I'll extend my stay here, you please back up the request, am wiring to the Colonel," said Lt. Simpson with agitation in his eyes. "Why not, Lt. Simpson, if you wish, Frank will surely write to your Colonel, please extend your leave, and you see, even I have to cancel my passage to England!" said Ethel.

"The natives are fiddling with their tomahawks," said Lt. Simpson, his face reddened with excitement.

"Mr. Simpson, you know Lt. Brackenbury, that chap with reddish hair with a banzo, ha, ha, twang, twong, twang. It is half past kissing time, and time to kiss again, ha, ha, pretty jolly chap," said Ethel resting her back on the chair and putting her ivory-like hands behind her blonde russet cut-short and she had a paroxysm of laughter.

"That chap from 44 G.R., quite a nice guy!" said Lt. Simpson with a smile, "Mr. Grimwood, I'll wire to my colonel to extend my leave at Manipur and you please back up the request."

"Yah, lieutenant," said Grimwood as he looked at him with scrutinising eyes. "I will send my private secretary to the Telegraph office."

"Thank God, Lieutenant, have a good time here, see the fun!" she cried out with a broad smile.

After lunch, they sat in a ring and talked about the days to come very soon; Lt. Simpson scribbled on the paper to send the message to the colonel at Kohima. Kundu, the private secretary salaamed to Mr. Grimwood and took the telegram from the young lieutenant who said, "Tell the Post Master to send the message at once, what his name?"

"Ashutosh, the Post Master and Beitkuntha Nath, the signaller," said Grimwood in a low tone.

Morse codes, dots and dashes crashed between Imphal and Calcutta; Pitamber and Sangindhaja hung around the Post Office from morning to night despatching telegraph messages to Prince Pakka at Calcutta. "The ruler of Assam will come to Manipur. You, as far as in you lies, after consulting, quickly put to death? Letter will also come-Pakkasana."

Tekendrajit sent his choicest attendants to all villages in the cover of darkness for collection of intelligence from the old adherents of Pakka.

"Where are the slaves of Prince Pakka? Of course, Moni Lal Dey and a host of his attendants opted to spend their lives in exile," cried out Prince Jilla to the Yubarajah, here are Pitamber, Sangindhaja and a host of others who shuttled between the residency and the Telegraph office to keep everything abreast of

time. ! Any spark would start the conflagration !”

“Of course, Moni Lal Dey and Ashutosh, the Post Master speak the same language and they had secret communication through the wire all the time,” said the Yubarajah in a tone surcharged with suspicion, “and now Pitamber never stops to communicate all what is happening here.”

“See that they have the communications with the dogs of the Sagol Hanjaba,” continued Tekendrajit nodding his head to Prince Jilla,” now call Bamon Charan to draft a message to send to Gopal Singh, the major posted at Calcutta. Let us be quick because the Chief Commissioner is arriving at Manipur very soon and we have to confirm whether Ex-Maharajah Surchandra is coming with the Chief Commissioner or not. And how many guns do they bring to Manipur? All these things have to be ascertained !”

Sounds of tapping of boots on the pavement were heard General Thangal and Senapati Angousana barged into the royal chamber and threw themselves on the chairs quite tired. Their faces looked haggard and careworn. The old man rested his hand on the hilt of his sword. A sign that the old man had the premonitions of blood-sheds. The two discovered that Pitamber's residence had become a bee-hive of strange men and conspirators who over-shadowed all the movements in the palace. Some strange men hovered around the Telegraph office. Yesterday's rumours turned out to be to-day's events and what more rumours and gossips'. Atomacha of the Medical Hall and Sangindhaja sneaked into Pitamber's residence at Nityaipat and held rendezvous at the dead of night.

A week later, Ashutosh Mukherjee received one telegram from Moni Lal Dey. Beikuntha Nath almost ran into his office-room and gave the message saying “From Calcutta !” “Sure, it must be from Moni Lal Dey,” he said as he read the telegram “Deliver all the letters at home. Do not on any account give at the Manipur Post Office in the hands of your peons for delivery. I am distressed at hearing your message. Send answers Moni Lal Dey.”

Ashutosh was quite non-plussed to find that he had already received one telegram from Gopal Singh, the Royal Agent at Calcutta. “A tiger is shortly to be bagged at Manipur.” Of course,

it caused a stir in the palace. And so much suspicion among the princes especially, the fourth prince. Even the ladies of the Sanakeithel talked about the riddle. He wondered who could be 'the tiger.' The Chief Commissioner or Yubarajah Tekendrajit or the Regent! Of course, the Chief is coming, and he may be trapped, he said to himself as he called in Beikuntha Nath, the signaller. "Have you redirected the telegram message to Mr. Quinton, the Chief Commissioner before he left Calcutta?" "Yes, Boro Dada!" he said as he hunched over his shoulders.

The Morse codes dashed through the hills and jungles days and nights. It wailed and wailed across the dales and the vast tracts of the flatland of Bengal!

CHAPTER VIII

Ethel had one caller at her residence in the afternoon; he was Lt. Gurdon, Assistant Commissioner who had double marched all the way from Golaghat. The Grimwoods ushered him into the well-furnished guest room. His measured walks on the carpet floor and reticence gave the young couple a strong sense of uneasiness in their minds. His haggard-looking eyes made her tight-lipped and her husband circumspect. "Of course, he is on double marches to communicate something important for the coming visit of the Chief Commissioner." Grimwood said to himself.

Gurdon threw himself on the chair stretching his legs and had a cursory glance around; he seemed quite exhausted and withdrawn because of the long journey. "Mr. Gurdon, lunch at what time, tea or coffee, pretty nice to see you," Ethel said with a smile.

"Of course, please give black coffee after a long and tedious journey, and a good lunch after," he said curtly to her with a score of thanks; quite reticent he looked at her husband with owlsh eyes.

"How long will you stay with us, Mr. Gurdon," she asked looking at his face fanning her long lashes.

"Well, Madam, I'll stay only for two days and will proceed on March 17 in the morning and proceed to Karong or Keithelmanbi," he said and became tight-lipped again and he turned his face to avert her eyes.

"Why in the name of heaven so soon Mr. Gurdon!" she cried almost in tears, "two or three day's stay at this residency won't rob you of much time," she pleaded.

"Of course, of course, some other time, Madam," came the reply.

"Mr. Gurdon, we may fix up a programme for duck-shooting on the lake," she implored with a pathetic voice.

He did not listen but he said something to her husband and turning back to her he said, "Madam, some other day, this week is programme-packed."

Ethel rose from her chair, shuffled between kitchen and her living-room for the dinner; the khansaman was busy with sticks of cinnamon, spices and dressing of salads. She found that the spring evening was sharp and chilly. Mr. Gurdon was talking to her husband before the fire-place. They talked about the little day-to-day happenings in Manipur and the administration of the new Regent. Of course, the people are quite happy with the Regent, Grimwood said. To this, Mr. Gurdon listened with listlessness and engaged himself in some other papers holding in his two hands in the light.

"Mr. Grimwood, the Government of India have arrived at some decisions in Calcutta at a meeting of the Chief Commissioner and the Governor-General," Gurdon said tersely "these are very important pieces of documents and I would like to brief you well in advance before the visit of the Chief Commissioner to Manipur. And Mr. Grimwood, I have certain important communication to make to you in private," he said in a matter-of-fact tone.

Grimwood looked at him in consternation and he said nothing. His eyes blinked restlessly as he waited his words. Both looked at each other for a few moments.

"Mr. Grimwood, just a communication from the Chief Commissioner; he just wants to get your opinion," he said curtly.

Grimwood rose from the chair sluggishly and led the visitor to the little private room near his living-room; the head-bearer was quick on his heels to the room. Silently Gurdon followed him to the private room and sat on the chair facing him and he appeared in a tense mood with his weary-looking eyes scanning the paper before him.

"Mr. Grimwood, the Government of India have decided to deport the fourth prince, the Senapati from Manipur because of the last September revolution," he whispered through his thin lips and he scrutinised Grimwood's eyes who seemed quite surprised at the idea.

"The Regent shall be recognised as the ruler of the state," he continued, "there are certain other matters to discuss with you."

Grimwood almost jumped up from the chair at the idea of deportation of the Yubarajah and his face grew suddenly sullen with his eyebrows arching.

"Deportation of Yubarajah, my God! He has no hand in the last September rebellion." Grimwood almost cried in surprise.

"Mr. Gurdon, never had I imagined for a moment that this is the object of his visit and I thought Mr. Quinton is coming with the Ex-Maharajah in order to re-instate him on the gaddi but . . ." Grimwood said with his breath failing him and he looked at him with anger saying "But it is quite contrary!"

"Mr. Grimwood, this is the popular rumour on the way also and I heard people gossiping about the rumour," he said in a slow and drawling voice. "the Government of India have decided in a quite different way but the orders are quite clear, the Regent is to be recognised as the Maharajah and the fourth prince to be deported from Manipur.

"Are you sure, Mr. Gurdon?" Grimwood asked in a sullen voice.

"Yes, Mr. Grimwood," he replied in a grave voice.

"Why in the name of heaven, the Senapati is the most popular in Manipur and if he is removed from this place, there will be no else left to run the affairs of the state," he said in an affected voice.

"Mr. Grimwood, there are other ministers, Thangal and a lot to administer the state," he said, in reply.

"The old general is over eighty years, and could it be expected that he would be able to hold the post much longer and that, Mr. Gurdon, the Senapati may give some trouble to remove from this state," Grimwood said tersely.

"No, my dear, the Senapati is instrumental in bringing about the September revolution and besides, he had misbehaved on various occasions and so the Government of India have determined to punish him this time. This time he won't escape," he said in a slow and lingering voice.

"Mr. Gurdon, he was goaded into causing the revolution by Pucca Senna and that he is an inveterate enemy of his. His intention was to get rid of him not the Ex-Maharajah who fled in terror from his palace to the residency and, the Senapati may be treated leniently," Grimwood said in an apologetic tone.

"Mr. Grimwood, orders of the Government of India are quite clear, I hope so," he said in a curt tone.

"But, Mr. Gurdon, the Senapati would never be caught alive; he would sell his life dearly, and all that Government would get possession of would be his dead body, and that, I, the British resident was never acquainted with the decision of the Government and now I would wash my hands of the whole dirty business," Grimwood said in an angry voice.

He rose from his chair with a jerk and put his fingers on his forehead and his head reeled; he again threw himself on the chair. Mr. Gurdon looked at him quite pitiously putting the end of his pen into his mouth.

"Well, Mr. Grimwood, let us resume the talk next day and on March 17, I will leave Manipur for Karong and submit your opinion to the Chief Commissioner," Gurdon said in a slow and grave voice.

Mr. Gurdon handed over one bundle of files to Grimwood and rose from his chair and left the room with his shoes tapping on the carpet floor; he emerged from the room and he was greeted by the spring sunshine. He stood by the cluster of roses near the verandah for a moment and then he walked towards the carriage-drive. He wondered at the young Agent's intimacy with the native princes and how he debauched himself during the short period of his stay at the capital of Manipur. He is adamant and headstrong, he thought as he looked at the scant dressed garden hands cutting the dry twigs and saw the spring had brought all the thin and young leaves. The fresh and sweet March wind dashed against his face and felt himself quite at rest and he thought, at last, a fresh parley with the young Agent would bring both ends meets. Of course, he was young and inexperienced in the ways of the world, not to speak of the official jargons!

Mr. Gurdon walked into the well-furnished guest-room and threw himself on the chair and saw Ethel walking gingerly on the carpet floor inside his room and said, "Mr. Gurdon, lunch is announced." The Grimwoods and the guest had lunch on the heavy dining table. Ethel did not smell anything on that day and she was busy in the day-to-day happenings like one talking to a distant relative at a dinner. Mr. Gurdon listened attentively with grunts looking at her casually, her excuse was lack of food-stuffs for an Englishman. Of course, Grimwood is a pathetic figure,

Mr. Gurdon lamented, although he was girt with vicarious authority, he swooned at the mere idea of banishment of the Senapati, now the Yubarajah. Grimwood was almost reticent and his face showed anxiety and restlessness. Next day, Mr. Gurdon sat with the Agent in his private study and started the talk; the latter sat sullen with his mouth pouting as he opened the file. Of course, the file for the 'Fourth prince of Manipur'! Quite unsettled in his mind, he rested his hands on the table fanning one leaf unconsciously.

After an icy silence, he said, "Mr. Gurdon, if the Senapati is deported, how long and when he might ever be allowed to return to Manipur?"

"Mr. Grimwood, it is a matter for the Government of India to decide," Gurdon said as he dropped his pen on the table and rested his body on the back of the chair.

Grimwood turned his face away from him and looked through the window quite perturbed and did not listen to what Mr. Gurdon went on his harangue against the Yubarajah. Outside the room, the white buds and new twigs of the peach, and the apricot and the cherry trees encountered his eyes. He sat musing for a few moments looking at them and then he saw the white cranes wading on the shallow marshes of the lake. He sighed and longed for the happier days of his life in Manipur and then he saw the red livery dressed chapprassis standing like statues outside his office.

"The Senapati, now the Yubarajah has a large following, a bunch of followers in the palace, he will resist sternly, Mr. Gurdon and over and above this, he is popular in this state," Grimwood said with a sombre tone and then he showed restless in his eyes, "as I told you before he would sell his body quite dearly!"

"Mr. Grimwood, then what is the best way to get possession of the person of the Senapati without giving him a chance of offering forcible resistance," Gurdon said softly roving his eyes on the file before him averting his eyes and he sensed that the young Resident became rueful at the slightest idea of the banishment of a native prince. How could he debauch himself within such a short time, almost the fate of every Englishman posted to the native states in India or other colonial countries, he thought. He

saw him tight-lipped and looked sullen and almost in a fit to bluster; but he had a mission to kill the mocking-bird! Darn the native princes, he said through his lips.

"But Mr. Grimwood, please see if the Senapati would be arrested without bringing matters to a crisis in Manipur, and whether you, being the Political Agent, think it possible to bring pressure to bear on the Regent to deliver him, the Senapati over to us." Mr. Gurdon asked with his eyes quivering and scrutinising his face closely.

"Mr. Gurdon, since the Government did not communicate anything to me before for consultation, I would wash my hands of the whole dirty business, how could the Senapati be arrested although he was goaded into causing the September revolution by Prince Pucca Senna, an inveterate enemy of his," Grimwood said with his mouth pouting in a sullen mood. He looked sullen and offensive.

"But, Mr. Gurdon," he said again after a pause and looked Mr. Gurdon's face with the signs of innocence and his eyes twinkled like a child." What does it mean, that the Senapati should not be given an opportunity of forcible resistance."

"Mr. Grimwood, I tell you frankly that the details, and the procedures of how the Senapati should be arrested would be communicated to you by the Chief Commissioner," Mr. Gurdon said in a matter-of-fact tone. His eyes showed a sudden glow of light and with a smile he looked at Grimwood's face; he drew nearer the young Resident and with gleaming eyes, he observed him closely.

"Mr. Grimwood, what about other princes, and Jilla Singh, the youngest Prince? Is it absolutely necessary to deport them," he quipped in a genial tone.

"These princes, Mr. Gurdon! not so necessary to remove them", Grimwood said with his eyes gleaming.

"Mr. Grimwood, what about the Pucca Senna and certain others of Ex-Maharajah's party in Calcutta? I like your opinion, Mr. Grimwood, your opinion in this matter is much valued," Mr. Gurdon said.

"No, no, Mr. Gurdon, these princes should never be allowed to return because they were instrumental in bringing about the

September revolution," he said tersely, "they had by their own conduct incited the Senapati to break into open rebellion against the Ex-Maharajah."

Ethel shuttled between the kitchen and her room adjacent to the private study and she eavesdropped near the screened door but, to her surprise, she found that they were absorbed in whispered tones, deeply engaged in some important conversations. Quite helpless, she tip-toed towards the next room and waited her husband and Mr. Gurdon at the dining table. Lt. Simpson also joined her, but they kept on talking silently.

After this talk, Mr. Gurdon drafted a long draft for despatching the telegram to the Chief Commissioner on way to Manipur. He lamented that the Telegraph office was the beehive of the two warring parties and each at dagger's draw and he knew from Mr. Grimwood that Prince Pakka and his clerk Dey were in constant touch with Ashutosh or Pitamber or Sangindhaja through the telegram about the hour to hour happenings in Manipur. Any secret message would come in the hand of the two warring parties. It was no less useful to guard against leaking out the communication to them. Mr. Gurdon drafted the messages in English and then in Italian and he sighed as he found that no code was in use to transmit the secret and therefore he put the message in a brown envelope and dashed towards the Telegraph Office. Everything around was quite and calm in the residency compound. The Grimwoods sent him off shaking hands with him as he was about to get on his horse near the carriage-drive. "So long Grimwoods, let us meet again at Sengmai," he said as he waved his hand. Grimwood looked at him with discordant sounds ringing in his ears.,

Brisk preparations were made by the Grimwoods after Mr. Gurdon's departure from the residency: the garden hands were carrying basketful of dry leaves and grasses. The Yubarajah visited the residency in the afternoon and Ethel, on seeing him dismounted from the palanquin said, "Your Royal Highness, please join us in the lounge, just pretty afternoon, Lt. Simpson is also waiting us."

"Memsahib, just very pleased to see you, and I am coming to see you and talk about the duck-shooting at the Logtak lake with the lieutenant," the Yubarajah said in a merry tone.

"Your Royal Highness, the Chief is coming to Manipur on 22nd March, perhaps on Sunday, being the only lady in this mansion, I have to man the kitchen for the Chief; Frank ordered some sheep, four from Silchar but all died on the way! my headache for the recipe for the Chief and his entourage," said Ethel almost lamenting.

"Memsahib, I had some sheep but all killed for inviting some Mussalman officers in my bangalow and ah, now quite helpless," the prince said. "I will send my shikaris to collect fowls and geese from the lake in a day or two."

The Yubarajah left the residency on a palanquin towards the palace; the palace was caught in a dilemma, whether to attack the Chief Commissioner at the Mao hill station. The Viceroy had so long not vented anything to the new Maharajah but the restoration syndrome, as the people called, showed in strange ways against the back-drop of the decisions arrived at Calcutta.

"But, the Chief must be attacked at Mao by Prince Angousana, the Senapati with a thousand troops if the Chief Commissioner comes to restore the deposed Maharajah," said General Thangal in the darbar. "better live in freedom for two days only rather than live in servitude for ages." Prince Jillangamba, the Shamu Hanjaba woke up from his seat quite restless with his hands sweating in the March heat and then he threw himself down on the chair. The darbar went on endlessly without any respite.

"Shall Ex-Maharajah Surchandra come with the Chief Commissioner," asked Maharajah quite unconsciously but there was no answer. He looked around in the darbar and found Thangal snoring.

Tap, tap sounded the telegraph endlessly; the little valley of mango groves, golden paddy-fields and mirror-like Logtak lake vibrated with the throbbing signs of a tense moment at the capital; even the foot-step of a man in the dead of night on the sensitive strategic roads of residency and palace road might not be left un-noticed; the telegraph went on—Do Maharajah Surchandra come with the Chief Commissioner to Manipur? Do they carry cannons, if so how many? Do Sagol Hanjaba come with the Maharajah?

The Yubarajah sent the messages to Major Gopal Singh, Agent of the Maharajah at Calcutta.

At such hour of the imminent arrival of the Chief, the residency put up the ordinary shows, flourish of the band music, afternoon tennis plays and the afternoon horse-rides of Ethel and Lt. Simpson. The kuts dressed in tight martial dresses walked on the top of the brick walls along the palace moats, some other kuts jutting out their heads from the parapets and sentries at the western gate looked at Ethel and Lt. Simpson while riding past the gate.

The red disc sun shone with the primeaval redness. After the evening ride, Ethel sat in the drawing-room and discussed the recipe during the Chief's stay at the residency. Lt. Simpson looked at her quite helpless. Melville and O'Brien returned from the inspection duties at Tammu and joined her in the drawing. She drew up a committee of four members for the dinner of the Chief. She had a list of menus, pies and tarts, plum pie, fruit tart, meringue tart, treacle tart, chiffon tart, puddings and pasta!

"For four hundred escorts, a considerable number of officers, I hope so, my God," said Ethel exultantly, "but the exact number of officers must be confirmed and something good must be procured for sumptuous dinners."

"Ma'm" said Melville softly.

"Just honestly, four sheep died on the way on the Cachar tract!" cried out Ethel.

"Ma'm, why don't you collect one goat from the nearby villages for a few takas," said Mr. Melville, rubbing his unkempt chin. His longish face seemed tired after the long journey from Tammu.

Ethel rose from her chair and shouted as she walked down the corridor, "Moonia, Moonia, call the head-bearer and I have something to tell him, quite urgent piece of business," As she walked she met the head-bearer who bowed his head before her. "Well, I met you here, you send some chapprassis to the nearby village to fetch goats on payment of a few takas, hurry up!" said she to the head-bearer and she paced towards her husband's office. She found that the visit of the Chief Commissioner had made the residency brisk preparations for reception amidst the uncertainty among the native princes for a surprise attack on the escorts of the Chief. She thought it was her folly to cancel her passage to England. Of course, she might be now at Turin or Paris. She stood on the door and found Grimwood deeply engaged

in some correspondences raking his head resting on his hand," "Frank," she said and looked at him closely resting for hands on the backs of the chair, "better buy one goat from the village beyond the river and I think, that would serve better."

Ethel sat near her husband on a chair opposite him and looked at him scrutinising his face which appeared to hang a heavy thought; he was reticent and withdrew his face from her and he raised his lips quite impulsively but he suddenly tightened his lips. "Frank, what is all this?" cried out Ethel, "you seemed quite gloomy after Mr. Gurdon's departure, and what he had conveyed to you quite secretly, God knows, you were quite hale and hearty before his arrival but now your face show something that you are hiding and you also don't care to give an inkling of all you talked about in the private room?"

She rose from her chair and moved about in the room; she heaved a sigh and looked sour gasping for breaths. She pretended not to look at her husband who sat quite speechless absorbed on something else. Nothing was heard save the tapping of Moonia's slippers on the pavement in the corridor. Grimwood looked at her with a twitch in his eyes but he sank under some stray thought. She sat throwing herself on the chair opposite her husband and engaged herself in some embroidery. Both sat quite long time without any words.

A knock was on the door and Kundu came in with a message of telegraph from Prince Pakkasana, the Sagol Hanjaba who stayed at Calcutta with the Ex-Maharajah Surchandra. With a salaam he handed over the message to the Agent saying, "One telegraph from Prince Pakkasana to Atomacha Singh of the Medical Hall, the peon handed over the telegraph thinking that it was an important message," and he left in a moment. He tore the envelope quickly and read the message. The Assam ruler will come. Do you all put a great many to death quickly—reply soon.

"What are all these trashes, the Sagol Hanjaba stirring in his grave!" he said with a grin, "and hell and what these princes are, I am sure, they will put up a good show!"

"What's all this, Frank, you are fussing about," Ethel said to her husband and she suddenly rose from her seat and walked to his side and read the message and she wetted her lips as her eyes scanned it.

After Gurdon's departure, Grimwood received intelligence from his security forces that kuts and lallups carrying muskets and smooth bore guns streamed into the fort-palace under the cover of darkness. "What is the Yubarajah up to?" Grimwood said quite impatiently. But the old general vexed him with constant questions, "With how many sepoy and guns do the Chief come to Manipur, do they bring any mountain guns? Is the Ex-Maharajah coming to Manipur".

One afternoon, Grimwood was quite taken back to get an information from the palace that Senapati Angousana had prepared to resist the visit of the Chief Commissioner at Mao station with one thousand royal soldiers, and if possible, to attack the Chief there. He called his orderly to harness his horse and he galloped towards the palace and he even forgot to put on his hat.

Grimwood barged into the Maharajah's chamber with agitation in his eyes and said, "Your Highness, this cannot happen, the Chief is coming not to wage any battle against you, it's sheer foolishness to resist and fight a battle against the Chief at Mao. Ex-Maharajah is not coming with the Chief."

The old General and Tekendrajit sat around Maharajah Kullachandra and they gazed at him in consternation: Thangal looked at his face and said, "But Agent Sahib, can you say that the Maharajah is not coming with the Chief Commissioner? If you can say this we won't resist his entry into Manipur!"

Those in the presence of the Maharajah waited in suspense and looked at the Political Agent with his eyes staring on the carpet-floor. He said at last, "Of course, we like no war but if the Chief Commissioner comes to punish us, I have no means save taking up the arms against him and if he is not coming with the Ex-Maharajah, we won't do anything that's all, Agent Sahib. But we're waiting the telegram from our Agent at Calcutta and this will decide."

Grimwood left the chamber without a word. But the Maharajah and his Commander-in-Chief sat till late evening to see what course of action should be taken. Tekendrajit sat sadate and without any word.

Grimwood's timely intervention not to launch a foolish war against the visiting Chief Commissioner on the height of Mao village at the border of Manipur was only an interlude and the

age-long suspicion of the Britishers could not be erased from their minds in the palace circles, and in a sense, it was to add an abrasive edge to the moppery. Major Gopal Singh, the Agent at Calcutta sent a crash message to the Maharajah to confirm that Ex-Maharajah was staying at the city. The darbar in the Top Garod sat for hours till late night, and Thangal and Giridhari were carried by the saner decision; the old general headed the reception party with seven hundred kuts with muskets and sniders. The general always rose to the occasion and he rode at the head of the party through the small dales of Mayangkhang along the winding Imphal river and on the height of the Lairou hills flanked by the Barrak river with the golden ripples of the sunshine and along the steep game-tracts along the placid Barrak river. His heart throbbed and looked around the blue expanse of the sky and he sensed that some feeling preoccupied his mind which he did not feel earlier. His eyes moistened and his heart throbbed like waves surging in his heart.

Prince Angousana, now the Senapati and Col. Shamu galloped towards Sekmai station with an escort of fifty kuts. Grimwood had already left the residency to have a parley with a Chief. At the gate, he saw Lt. Brackenbury, his old friend who was posted to Langthabal Cantonment in his earlier days. The atmosphere was surcharged with an air of suspicion and tight-lipped diplomatic overtures. Prince Angousana, on his arrival at Sekmai shook hands with the Chief Commissioner and his party and his sleuths smelt like hounds in the nooks and corners of the camping site and he turned towards Col. Shamu and said in whispers, "The Kameson Saheb did not come with cannon and no traces of Ex-Maharajah could be seen and what the Engrez are upto?"

"Wait and see, Senapati, let us see what is lying in his sleeves," Col. Shamu said in a low tone.

Quinton emerged from the tent under the spreading shamiayana with Cossins, Col. and other army officers and stood on the steps to meet the emissaries from the Maharajah of Manipur; Grimwood and Lt. Brackenbury stood on the left flank. Prince Angousana and Col. Shamu stepped towards the Chief and shook hands.

"Your Royal Highness Prince Angousana, the Senapati," Col. Shamu said as he introduced the young prince and they shook hands, "His Highness, the Maharajah of Manipur is exceedingly

happy to welcome Your Excellency, the Chief Commissioner of Assam."

"Hope His Highness is quite fine," Quinton said as they clasped their hands.

"Quite fine by the grace of Lord Govindajee. Your Highness Excellency," Col. Shamu said while the young prince with his red paan-stained lips looked at him in askance.

"Very glad to see you all, Mr. Cossins where is the letter addressed to the Maharajah?" Quinton said looking at his secretary who stretched his hands with an envelope; he took the letter and handed over to the young prince and said, "We will hold a darbar to-morrow at twelve at the residency and all princess should attend the darbar, you understand."

"Your Excellency, but it is Sunday," Col. Shamu said in a low tone as well as hesitant mood as the young prince took the letter from him.

The Chief retired to his room. The prince, Giridhari and Col. Shamu went towards a rest camp.

"Senapati, to hold a darbar on Sunday and also it is at the residency not at the palace darbar as in the past and the day also a Dwadashi," Col. Shamu whispered in utter confusion.

"Uncle Colonel, it is a word within a word and let us send one sardar to the Maharajah with this letter and seek his opinion and at the same time, let us approach the Agent Sahib to change the day, say on Monday while the Chief would take rest in the residency after the long journey, is it not better, Uncle Colonel?" the young prince said and he gave a sign to the sardar standing at the head of the kuts. The sardar came to the Senapati in long strides and bowed his head.

"Deliver this letter to the Maharajah and also inform the contents of the letter to Yambung Tekendrajit and you gallop your horse and must report to us again to-day," the young prince said.

After two hours' gruelling parley with the Chief, Grimwood moved out of the room with tiredness writ large on his face, and then he walked towards the hedge on the other side of the camping site; the spiring breeze fluttered the* multi-coloured frills of the shamiyana; his contorted appearance with his inert

arms with one hand clasping his hat with dishevelled hairs was an indication of tiredness of a highly placed official after a long parley and he had undergone more than two hours gruelling dialogue with the Chief; the sardars, at the behest of Col. Shamu and the Senapati contrived to eavesdrop the proceedings of the parley but to no avail. Col. Shamu saw him from a distance, quite restless and almost reeling with a bent back and he supported himself by resting his body on the post.

"Uncle Colonel, shall I talk the matter to the Agent sahib, because such a darbar could not be held on Sunday; that is against the tradition!" cried the Senapati with his lips quivering in anger.

"No, Senapati, unless and until we get an instruction from the Maharajah," said the colonel, "let us wait what the Maharajah and the Yubarajah have any say on this matter".

With his hands clasped behind his body, he strolled on the green lawn looking angrily around him and saw Lt. Brackenbury sitting at the far end of the camping site sipping tea with Capt. Boileau and Lt. Chatterton and Lt. Luggard. Haridas Bannerjee, the Chief's clerk emerged out of the conference room with a big file. The parley ended almost after an eternity.

Hooves of ponies clattered on the dusty road and the sardar and his escorts returned from the palace. He dismounted from his horse and rushed towards the tent where Senapati Angousana was sitting with Col. Shamu and bowed with his knees touching the ground. The Senapati took the letter from the Sardar and sprung from the chair saying, "Alright, the letter from the Maharajah has arrived, uncle, let us see the Agent saheb to approach the Chief Commissioner to postpone the darbar.

"Of course, the darbar must be postponed and to hold a darbar on the Dwadashi will invite no good, an omnimous sign when the land is about to be struck with a calamity and why should the darbar be held so hastily? No, the motive is quite clear, only a sinister motive to do something," Col. Shamu said with sighs.

"Uncle, the Agent saheb should also press the Commissioner to postpone the darbar and say the Maharajah is reluctant to hold the same on the Dwadashi, after the day of fasting by all the Vaishnavites, such a darbar will be infructuous and the Chief holding the highest place in the province, wiser and more

benevolent, will gracefully see some other auspicious days and he is not a fool to fix the date of holding the darbar on such an unholy day," the prince said.

With the scroll of letter in his hand, the Senapati walked towards the Agent's tent with hope and earnestness. Col. Shamu followed him behind while the spring wind raced through the young leaves of teaks in the afternoon. The Gurkha orderly accosted the two and announced their visit to Mr. Grimwood who emerged from his tent to welcome the two dignitaries saying "Your Royal Highness, what can I do for you?" His face concealed signs of his unsettled mind and depredation and with a mechanical smile, he ushered in the two in his tent. Col. Shamu's eyes, like a frightened rat apprised the Agent of the Maharajah's desire to defer the date of holding the darbar to some suitable day for the next day being the parna Dwadashi. The Hindus rarely held any important darbar on that day.

"Agent saheb, the Maharajah is quite anxious to hold the darbar on Sunday being the parna Dwadashi, one day after fasting and the Maharajah sends a letter to the Chief Commissioner for postponement of the darbar to some auspicious day, the outcome of the darbar will be fructuous. But, you see, Agent saheb, this is against our tradition. Every Hindu is on fast on the day of Akadashi, this day and on Dwadashi, the next day, he takes his meals and you see, the Agent Saheb, the Chief also will desire at least one day's rest after such a long journey," Col. Shamu pleaded with his lips quivering and he threw himself on the chair and looked at the young saheb scrutinising his face. He tapped his hand on the handle of the chair as he waited his reply quite anxiously.

"Colonel saheb, I don't see the Chief would postpone the darbar in any case because he is on an urgent business, in a day or two, he is proceeding Tammu and therefore he is bent on holding the darbar, tomorrow in the residency darbar without fail for an important announcement," Grimwood said in a sedate voice with an air of mystery and conspiracy in his blue eyes.

"An announcement in the darbar?" Col. Shamu asked in consternation while Senapati Angousana looked at the Agent in breathing an air of suspicion and mistrust.

"Of course, the Viceroy's hukum!" said Grimwood through his teeth, "a bit urgent one!"

The Senapati and the Colonel looked at him without any words.

"Colonel, we can't put up such proposal to the Chief" Grimwood said in a breathless tone, "but please don't mis-understand me! Your Royal Highness, no help, very sorry."

The Senapati and Col. Shamu left the place without a word and moved towards the tent. "What is the Commissioner up to!" Senapati Angousana grumbled as he walked. He saw the troops drilled with their rifles at the far end of the ground while the bugles sounded at the base of the flagpole.

An unusual uncertainty hung around the residency; Ethel was talking to Mr. Melville and Lt. Simpson in her drawing-room about the reception and the menu for the dinners of the guest-in-chief. The Superintendent of Telegraphs, being a lame man used to carry walking stick and he sat on the chair with his chin resting on the stick and it seemed that he was quite restless as he was about to take a journey just after his arrival from the border station of Tammu. His face showed a wry and gloomy countenance and he himself disengaged from the hubbub of the arrival of the Chief Commissioner at the residency. He picked up an English daily, Harper's from the table and scanned the lines. Of course, being a lame, he was quite detached from the company of ladies and his friends.

Lt. Simpson rose from the chair and paced to and fro humming a music on his lips and tried to enliven the conversation. With light-heartendness, his lips sounded the perfect notes of music. But Mr. Melville payed no attention to him and got himself absorbed in the old newspaper.

The red livery chapprassi knocked on the door and delivered a telegraph message to Ethel who opened the envelope and she cried out, "Hey, eleven officers coming to this residency, tomorrow at ten O'clock in the morning. Eleven heads, Mr. Simpson and together with us make fifteen!"

"Fifteen, ma'm, what is the harm even if it goes up to twenty," Simpson said as he looked through the window looking at poor Heath's Satyr-like memorial stone in the back-yard.

Mr. Melville looked up at her with his teeth grinding the pipe in his mouth, and nodded his head.

"Okay, the wild ducks and soups and soups," Ethel said with an air of hopelessness and she suddenly rose from her chair, "Mr. Simpson, let us have an evening ride around, Mr. Simpson."

The two left the drawing-room leaving Mr. Melville in the drawing-room who said, "Okay, have a ride, I'll be here."

Ethel rode towards the western gate of the palace where the kuts and lallups streamed into the palace; she looked towards the old China brick bridge over the Nambul river but the royal irregular sepoy straggled along the dusty road leading to the palace. She wondered at the sea of the black turbaned heads on the road at such an unusual time. Tomorrow, the Chief would be at the residency quite busy with his gobbledegook and her husband would pace to and fro in his office, she thought. A lean dinner, she said to herself, for her boss. Only soups and soups and fowls! By her side, Lt. Simpson trotted along the dusty road quite unmindful of all around them who said to her, "What, these natives are up to?" They rode through the kuts and lallups swarming near gate towards the north along the moat and rode along the small Naga rivulet making a round of the small town. She wondered at the gazing eyes of the lallups coming from unknown and distant villages who looked at her in amazement at her white skin. She rode on quite heedless with the young lieutenant. She sensed the forebodings of some unusual happening in the near future and she felt a heavy thought overhanging in her mind.

The March sun raced towards the blue western hills as they rode towards the Sanakeithel from the other end of the road near the China brick bridge.

"What would happen if the natives attack on the residency?" Ethel said looking at the young lieutenant.

"Of course, the natives are the most unpredictable, Ma'm," the young lieutenant said in reply, "but they won't risk a war with us when the Chief is with us." "I like real fighting."

"Is it?" cried Ethel in wonder looking at him with her mouth agape.

"Of course, an action, Ma'm!" shouted Lt. Simpson as they approached towards the western gate of the palace as dusk came.

After the evening ride, Ethel walked in the moon-light in the garden with Lt. Simpson; Mr. Melville sat at the far end of the garden with his pipe in his mouth and his walking stick by his side. The moon was already up in the sky above the deodar and tall peepul trees casting a calm atmosphere on the residency. Poor Moonia was quite unusually active in that evening and she was seen moving through the corridor with some bundless in her hands. Sounds of mridangas and dhullaks filled the air in the distant temples. Of course, the natives would enjoy the Holi festival in a day or two, Ethel said to herself as she strolled towards the carriage-drive with the young lieutenant. Hooves of horses were heard near the northern gate of the residency and Grimwood appeared at the place on his horse with his escorts.

Grimwood dismounted from his horse leaving the rein to his Gurkha escorts and without a word he went towards his room. Ethel followed her husband behind him who appeared weary and haggard.

"Frank, what happened?" Ethel asked as she paced towards her husband, "What the Chief says?"

Grimwood went inside his room without a word and threw himself on a chair. He rubbed his dusty chin with his hand and turned his face away from her. Ethel sat near her husband and heard him sigh with hoarse sounds. With his head resting on the back of the chair he turned his face away from her who looked at him with scrutinizing eyes. She told her head-bearer to bring hot coffee for him.

Grimwood looked too tired partly because of the riding from Sekmai and the next day's work in the darbar. The head-bearer got himself busy with the pressure-lamps in the drawing-room. The sound of conversation between Lt. Simpson and Mr. Melville was heard in his room. With a sigh, he looked aside with a vacant look and rubbed his chin.

"Well, what is tomorrow's programme, what reception by the residency and what, in the darbar?" she asked her husband looking at him with her eyes strained to scan his emotion. Said she, "Dearie, you appeared like one possessed, what is all happening I don't know, after Mr. Gurdon's departure, your trouble commenced!"

"It is nothing but one damned secret, top-secret!" he said with

his face pressing out a grin, "what lousy secret, what this boss is driving at!" He said lashing at Mr. Quinton who was on his way to Imphal, "This night he will halt at Sekmai and at ten in the morning he will arrive at this residency."

"Is it all, Frank?"

"No, the Yubarajah will be arrested tomorrow in the darbar after the proclamation of the Viceroy's orders, hell, the Regent will be recognised as the ruler and the Yubarajah will be banished from this state," he said pouting his lips, "but is it not crazy?"

"What is all this, a pretty damned thing!" she cried out in surprise, "and this is the Viceroy's orders, what have you said?" "The Regent will be declared as the ruler of the land while the author of the rebellion will be given the severest punishment!"

"Just a dirty business, he will be arrested tomorrow in the darbar after announcement of the Orders," Grimwood said gasping for breaths.

Ethel dropped the cup of coffee and looked at her husband in surprise.

"To arrest the Yubarajah in the darbar, just fantastic!" Ethel cried out.

Grimwood whispered putting his finger on his lip with the hissing sound of "Shsss". "Don't breathe any word to Mr. Melville or Lt. Simpson, I have to announce the orders!"

"My God," Ethel cried in surprise.

At the Yubarajah's residence, Meechao Lallup and Tonu Subedar walked towards the prince's dressing-room and told him that two regiments of picked kuts and sardars were already drawn up on the parade ground. Occasional sound of band music came inside the dressing-room. Of course, the prince wanted to present guard of honour to the visiting Chief Commissioner. The new army trained under the renegades from the Sepoy Mutiny and the British seargents during the reign of Sir Chandrakirti would give a smart passing-out before the special guest. A match for the Gurkha sepoy of the Chief!

"And, of course, the Kammeson saheb did bring neither the Sagol Hanjaba nor the Maharajah," said Shija Angangmacha as she paced in the dressing-room, "and no trouble may shoot up to-day." "And no cannon, Sanakhwa, but why the large number of sepoys coming with the Kammeson?" "Pray to Lord Govindaji and also don't forget to pray before the God Sanamahi and Goddess Leimaren, the household deities and pray, I'll return to this again." The Yubarajah said nothing but kept on dressing his silk robes; Meechao Lallup helped him put on green velvet zouve jacket and gold epaulettes, His wife opened the silver casket and picked up the pearl necklaces for her husband to wear on the day of arrival of the Chief Commissioner.

"Hand over the pistol loaded and the double edged knife," the Yubarajah said to Tonu Subedar. The prince sniffed the morning air and felt the hour of departure from his residence, and he walked down the stairs followed by his retinues. Chaobhal led the chestnut horse by the bridle and handed over the same. They rode towards the parade ground where Angom Giridhari, Nilamani, the Ayapurel and Lokendra, the Wangkheirakpa were waiting the prince in the morning sunshine. The band music played while the morning sunshine was surcharged with a mellow and crisp air. The two regiments moved on with the Prince Tekendrajit walking in his flowing silk robes. Taps of the boots and the band music mingled. Incense burning on the earthen cups filled the morning air at the gates of all dwelling houses on way to Koirengai. House-wives and children knelt before the passing prince and shouted "Be victorious, the Yubarajah!"

An air of wonderment and indecisiveness reigned on that day.

At Koirengai, Prince Tekendrajit, the Yubarajah accosted the Chief Commissioner; they shook hands amidst unusual cold smiles. Dassu Sardar walked behind the prince as his close aide.

"I am very happy to meet all the princes," Quinton the Chief Commissioner said through his tips, "and General Thangal, again we meet each other, please introduce all the princes one by one."

"Kammeson saheb, just I met the Yubarajah on the way and now I am coming over here to assist the prince," one old general said swaying his head, and he moved near the Yubarajah and said, "Yubarajah, Prince Tekendrajit Bir Singh,"

"The fourth prince, the Senapati!" Quinton said as they clasped hands, "Oh, I see, I see, the fourth one." He looked at the prince with a malicious look while Col. Skene eyed at the latter with cold eyes. With a grin, Quinton moved to the next prince and said, "Oh, I met him at Sekmai, quite well-behaved prince." He, then shook hands with the Angom Ningthou and other ministers, and he paced back quickly to the Yubarahah and stood face to face with him.

"And the Senapati, why is it so the wooden bridge on the stream just there at the corner of the road was burnt yesterday, why is it so?"

"Your Excellency, I didn't see any bridge being burnt and perhaps the spring wild fires or the village urchins might did the mischevious pranks," the Yubarahah said quite surprised in his usual peremptory voice. He stood quite taken a back.

"Eh, of course, of course," the Chief replied.

The Yubarahah and General Thangal and other ministers left the place bidding good-bye to the Chief who said, "So long, general, we will meet again in a couple of hours."

At the western gate of the palace, red carpets rolled out with the flourish of the cannon salutes amidst the band music in the spring sunshine. The crowd jostled in front of the Maharajah who accompanied by Prince Jillangamba and other ministers walked to welcome the Chief Commissioner and his troupe at the gate. They shook hands and with clasped hands, the Chief said, "Regent saheb, I am very happy to see you all here and hope you to attend the darbar with all the princes. Mind that, Regent saheb, I meet you in the darbar at twelve noon!"

The last cannon sounded with reverberating echoes; the Chief Commissioner and his secretaries sat on the chair for a few moments and then left the reception party at the western gate of the palace. The Maharajah also walked towards the darbar hall to have a last minute discussion of the latest move of the Chief Commissioner for holding the darbar. Of course, the Ex-Maharajah and the Sagol Hanjaba were not in the Chief Commissioner's party. But a darbar on Sunday, just after the arrival of the Chief!

"Maja Ibungo, it is nothing but the plot and the conspiracy without which an Engrez cannot go on," General Thangal said aloud, "but are we not prepared to meet any challenge and why,

so much disillusion!"

"Ipu, let us see, let us ," Maharajah Kullachandra said in a soft and cautious tone as he walked under white canopy with its silk frills fluttering in the air.

"But, Srijut, have you seen?" the old general said looking at Prince Tekendrajit's face. "No cannon, no Maharajah Surchandra or no Sagol Hanjaba and no strong force!" They walked in haste to the darbar hall.

"What, your Ipu and the Yubarajah are having pretty nice gossips?" Col. Shamu said lampooning the two and to this, the old man looked back and made a guffaw saying, "Sanaton, why should we be afraid of the posse of the half-fed native soldiers and a few English officers? Hell cares, let us attend the darbar and see what they could do to us, and to Srijut."

Within minutes, white tents littered the whole campus of the residency and brisk preparations were made to accommodate the four hundred odd security personnel who accompanied the Chief. Lt. Simpson paced to and fro just in front of the darbar to arrange a tight security ring. It was about ten thirty O'clock; Kundu, the clerk and the Burmese interpreter were engaged in translating the Viceroy's hukum; two armed guards watched them round the clock to prevent any leakage of the orders.

"Well, Frank, what is that troubling you, you look pretty sad even at the break-fast table with the boss, so morose and tight-lipped and even you tried to keep everything concealed from me too," Ethel said putting her hand on her husband's shoulder. "You see the darbar will start within half an hour, what is that you are holding from me?"

"It is damned sorry business, I was ordered to undertake the arrest after announcement of the Viceroy's orders in the darbar," Grimwood said in an indignant tone. "To arrest the Yubarajah like a common felon!"

"Why so, Frank, why not somebody else?"

"The Chief won't change anything, whatever he thinks right, he gives orders!"

"My God, it is a pretty damned business!"

"Why should not the Chief consult me on this issue earlier and take my opinion on the matter, and I want to wash my hands

clean of this dirty affairs!"

"Indeed, it is correct", said Ethel at last.

Quinton sat tight-lipped in the drawing-room while Col. Skene and his secretary shuttled between the small office-room in which Kundu and the Burmese interpreter were translating the Viceroy's orders and the drawing-room. To their surprise, the translation was not ready. It was almost noon, the time for the darbar. Col. Skene had a cursory glance on the tight security ring around the convention hall as he detailed a good number of tough Gurkha sepoy's lining the entrance-steps, sepoy's on the steps and guards about the ground in the backyard. Mounted sepoy's with khaki turbans paraded outside the darbar hall. Capt. Boileau and Lt. Chatterton stood outside in the sunshine. The darbar was about to commence and, to her chagrin, she found that some guards with glinting bayonets entered into the adjoining room of the hall, and eyed the whole scene with a sudden acrimonious sensation.

"What is all this, Ma'm?" Lt. Simpson said to Ethel in surprise.

"No, Mr. Simpson, may be the routine security arrangement for the boss and of course, for His Highness!" came the reply almost in a lackadaisical tone.

Lt. Brackenbury walked towards the two with his mouth agape and said, "Afternoon, Ma'm," and he laughed at the whole scene.

"Hey, Lt. Brackenbury, pretty good afternoon," she said with an impetuous joy at his sight, "saw you coming with the boss."

"What, the hell, the old guy is up to in this meeting with the native chiefs?" the young lieutenant asked in a joking manner. "Seems the lady in the house is up in some put-up job?"

"By Jove, I am in the darkness, what is wrong?" She said with her eyes to evade blinking, "pretty good, Mr. Brackenbury, you are also here, and when you are leaving Manipur?"

"After the meeting hiz is over, probably, day after tomorrow?" Lt. Brackenbury said in reply.

Ethel looked at the whole scene with a sour feeling and cursed the same; something would happen, she said to herself and she traipsed on the front lawn with Lt. Simpson. Clusters of yellow roses blossomed with exotic charm and the scent of the heliotrope wafted through the spring breeze. Native roses grew in another

bed with bright colours.

Quarter to one, yet there was no hope of holding darbar; all the princes and the Maharajah had already arrived at the residency gate but they were refused entry into the residency. Quite restless, Ethel plucked one native rose and pressed it into her fingers.

"What type of variety is this rose?" Lt. Simpson said to her. To this she said, "The native type, I collected from Purundhar, the Burmese interpreter and it looks pretty nice." "But what has happened to the meeting? His Highness has already arrived at the gate but refused entry!"

Lt. Brackenbury paced towards the northern side of the residency. Ethel saw Dassu Sardar, the Muslim photographer walked towards her and saluted to her saying, "Good afternoon, Ma'm, how do you do?" "Fine, same to you, Sardar," she said in reply. The Sardar stood for a while near the two.

"His Highness and the Yubarajah had already arrived," Ethel said to the Sardar.

"Of course, of course, Mem-saheb!" the Sardar said with a grin, and he disappeared from the place. The Sardar went to the backyard where mounted sepoy and guards lined the verandah and, within a few minutes, he came back to Ethel's side with an artificial smile. She turned back and saw him with his hands rubbing his chin. She went to the cluster of native roses and plucked a big rose and handed it over to the Sardar.

"Sardar, give this rose to Yubarajah Tekendrajit and tell him to count its petals," Ethel said as she stood near the Sardar.

The Sardar looked at the rose and then at Ethel in surprise and said, "Mem-saheb," and left the place. Lt. Simpson looked at the whole scene quite astounded and wondered whether she was infatuated with the native prince called Yubarajah Tekendrajit.

"But, Sardar, tell the prince to count the number of its petals and you are to ensure the answer to me?" Ethel said to the Sardar who was already walking ahead.

"Sure, Mem-sahib," the Sardar said in reply.

Ethel and Lt. Simpson walked towards the carriage-drive; she saw the Maharajah and his retinues under the shade of the big tree at the residency gate.

Almost one o'clock!

"Grimwood sahib, how long shall we wait?" old General Thangal quipped to the young Agent.

"A pretty time more, General Saheb!" Grimwood replied "there is brisk preparation for commencement of the darbar." After saying this, he hustled towards the residency.

At the gate, Yubarajah Tekendrajit said with consternation in his eyes, "Yambung, when such reception occurred, shall we wait, the Head of a state on the road till eternity in the full gaze of the people of Wangkhei, and Khwai and a host of our subjects who walked on this road! The Chief wanted to commence the darbar at twelve and now it's about one o'clock and what happened now!"

"Yubarajah, be patient, may be, something left undone for the darbar!" the Maharajah said in a soft voice but his moistened eyes showed that his mind was too much weighed down by the uncertainty of the darbar and the sarkar's plan for restoration of kingship in Manipur.

The Yubarajah looked at his watch and to his surprise, it was almost one! His face showed agitation and sighed and said to himself, "Hell cares for such darbar!"

"Is it not a ruse to hold a darbar on Sunday and also only to dishonour the Maharajah and his ministers not to speak of all the princes who come here to pay homage to the Chief," Yubarajah said with heaves of sighs, almost in an uncontrollable mood and he turned his face and encountered Dassu Sardar's face who stood at a distance looking at him with something in his mind.

"Sardar," the Yubarajah asked moving towards him in order to cool him off.

"The Memsahab sends this rose to the Yubarajah," the Sardar said as he handed over the flower to him. The prince looked at the rose in surprise; he took it and put on his green velvet jacket.

"Sardar," the Yubarajah said finding himself in a quandry.

"But, but, Yubarajah, Memsahib desires a reply from the Yubarajah," the Sardar said, "the number of the petals of the rose that grows in your native land!"

The Yubarajah scanned the petals in his hands with a smile in

his face and to his surprise, he found a message. "Yubarajah, go away!" and he put it in his buttonhole and walked towards the Maharajah and said, "Yambung Maharajah, I fell suddenly unwell standing in the sunshine and fasting on the Akadashi yesterday. I fell very exhausted and also there is no sign of the darbar until now and with your permission, I am leaving this place."

The Maharajah nodded in assent to the Yubarajah who gestured to Senapati Angousana to go with him.

"Sardar, follow me!" said the Yubarajah as he mounted his chestnut horse.

"But, Yubarajah saheb, the number of petals that Memsahab inquired of, please tell for I am on her errand?" the Sardar said in a serious whispered voice.

"Sardar, enough time to gossip with a lady, hurry up," said the Yubarajah as he whipped his horse and galloped on the road with the dust rising like the tails of a calf.

A dumb hour ensued after his departure because the Yubarajah, being the Commander-in-Chief of the royal forces had sensed something; the Maharajah felt himself quite forlorn. He said looking at the old General, "Ipu, you and I am to bear all the responsibility alone."

"The darbar is a ruse and it is as clear as daylight but see till the end, what the hell the Engrez are doing!" General Thangal spewed out of his thin lips, but all the ministers went through the humiliation without a word. Signs of anxiety and crying shame blackened his face. What, more kicks than half pence, the old man thought, for the visit of a Chief brought new overtures and new glory to the Maharajah and the land. Now, the Maharajah that is God-incarnate in all the fables and legends of the land turned out to be a gazing-stock! He, now was waiting outside the residency darbar for a seat, and for a parley with the Chief in his own land. The consequences would be ominous and invite disaster, old Thangal pleaded but he only pouted his lips in utter contempt. The old man said, "Courage and courage, nothing else." He pressed the young Agent to hold the darbar for which the ruler of the land was through travails of heat and shame in the presence of his own subjects.

"The darbar shall not be held without the Senapati, Prince

Tekendrajit Bir Singh, the fourth prince," Grimwood held forth with a grin; a precondition for holding the darbar. "The Chief won't see even the Maharajah to-day without the Senapati, now Yubarajah!"

The Maharajah and his ministers waited in the darbar-hall with their buttocks hot as embers. What more humiliations had they in store! Nilamani, the Ayapurel raced towards the residence of Prince Tekendrajit, the Yubarajah to beg his attendance in the darbar in the residency. A precondition for holding the parley with the Chief Commissioner. "But the prince is in a febrile state lying on his princely bed attended by his Ranis," the Ayapurel said to the Maharajah as he knelt before him. "Fasting yesterday on the Akadashi and marching from Koirengei and standing in the sun shine before the residency for the darbar disabled him from attending the darbar."

General Thangal's persistent call for paying respect to the visiting Chief Commissioner and the purpose of his visit to Manipur and of course, the Viceroy's hukum were turned down by Mr. Grimwood; who said, "The Chief even won't see the Maharajah and the Regent without the Yubarajah's attendance in the darbar!"

The Maharajah and his retinues walked away from the darbar hall like phantoms in the moonlight! It was a phantasm and a chimera, a Talstaff! The darbar was postponed to 8 o'clock next day and the day's darbar ended in fiasco!

In a day or two, the Holi festival would throw the people, old and young in the festival of red colour and dance in the moonlight; the Maharajah threw himself on a red velvet covered sofa and watched the thirteenth day moon rising slowly over the Sebak-Loishang; he thought the Chief would leave Manipur after one day and he went through the travails in a quiet and calm manner, and he sent porters for the Chief for his journey to Tammu. Nongthomba Phullo busied himself for the Ras dance in the palace.

Of course, the Chief would leave Manipur for Tammu in a day or two; he would attend the Ras dance played by the choicest danseuse in the night in the Top Garod; some hundreds of porters were kept in the lallup barracks for carrying the personal effects and provisions of the Chief Commissioner and his escort of four hundred to Tammu.

The moon rose over the tall trees with its murky colour; the wild fires in the nearby hills brought soot and dust in the spring sky but the freshness of the season was in the air. The Ministers sat around the Maharajah in silence. What a dumb hour! Was the nation in peril! The Chief denied to strike up a conversation in the darbar after marching from the Imperial capital on the whistling rails, on the yatches, horses and on foot through the hill tracts of the Barrak valley.

"A blatant lie," Kullachandra Dhaja said, "to leave Manipur without sending the Viceroy's proclamation to the palace!" "Was the Chief in a jiggery-pokery!"

Market-goers sitting on the roadsides and on the polo-ground and the ladies of Sanakeithel talked about the humiliation of the ruler of the land at the residency darbar and they talked about a showdown between their ruler and the British sarkar; the market was deserted in the afternoon. They almost wept over the fate of their beloved Yubarajah who was, by then bed-ridden with colic pain. On the next day the Maharajah and his ministers did not attend the darbar in the residency for they said, without the Yubarajah's attendance in the darbar, the Chief Commissioner would not give an attendance. The ladies of the Sanakeithel stopped vending but engaged themselves in gossips about the Viceroy's proclamation and his intention to leave Manipur for Tammu. But he would attend an audience in the palace for the Ras dance. "A big tiger is to be bagged in Manipur," they said recalling the telegram message from Major Gopal Singh, the Royal Agent in Calcutta. "The Puranas say five heads of white men will lay in front of the two dragons and how many white men came with the Kammeson saheb?"

Of course, Prince Tekendrajit wished his exile from this kingdom in the interest of the Maharajah and the people, they said almost with tears in their eyes. But the darbar flatly denied his surrender to the Engrez sarkar. Grimwood and Lt. Simpson attended the darbar and handed over the Viceroy's proclamation to the Maharajah. Bamon Charan, the royal clerk read the hukum in the darbar with his spectacles almost falling from his nose. The young Agent's insistent to have a parley with Tekendrajit failed after the Maharajah's temerity to oppose the Viceroy's hukum. But the whole country was throbbing with the prestine love for self-rule and yearning for independence from the Engrez sarkar!

The Yubarajah rode a palanquin when he came to have a parley with Grimwood in his sanggai. Lt. Simpson and Kundu, the residency clerk looked helpless at his condition sitting on the chair supported by pillows. But the prince denied his surrender to the Chief without the approval of the darbar and said had he been not ill he could have attended the darbar in the residency. The young lieutenant sat dumb watching the disposition of the sardars and lallups in the prince's sanggai, and he looked around like a watchful eagle with a sneer. The kuts and lallups moved with black cotton dhotis and black turbans with muzzle-loading guns in and around the sanggai, some sat playing the dice, some polishing the epaulettes and some putting their guns resting on the walls.

"The deuce! the deuce is in it if I cannot, that fourth son of Sir Chandrakirti should be bundled out of this little kingdom," Quinton bawled out to Grimwood in the drawing-room who reported that the prince did not agree to the Viceroy's hukum, and he called Kundu, the head clerk to send a message to the palace that he had altered his plan to go to Tammu and instead he would go to Kohima and for this he needed four hundred coolies for carrying the provisions of his escorts, and he wanted to see the dance at 8 o'clock in the night.

Col. Skene and Lt. Skene drew up a plan to nab the prince in a morning raid.

Mr. Melville and O'Brien, the signaller left the residency in the afternoon for Kohima, said he, "Mrs. Grimwood, I am not important enough to be captured by the Manipuris and I shall get on all right, never fear. Thank you very much for the kindness you have shown to me." Saying this he rode off along the carriage-drive in the afternoon. A storm lashed the town after dusk and the moonlight shone with its silvery light.

Ethel walked along the verandah and found Moonia's small room without a light and she called "Moonia, Moonia." But, to her surprise she found that she had also left the residency in the cover of darkness. Suddenly she found a chill in her spine and she stood speechless waiting the wall-clock to tick away time. "Where she could be, poor Moonia!" she almost cried out, "in a hostile land where she has not a single friend!"

With tears in her eyes, Ethel stood on the doorway of the kitchen and raked her brain for the recipes; the Chief was busy

with his secretaries and military advisers. Col. Skene and Lt. Simpson discussed the plan for attack on the Yubarajah's sanggai. In the next room, Lt. Brackenbury was running his sleek fingers on the banzo. "Have a go, pretty nice!" Surgeon Calvert said with a smile on his lips with a glass of champagne in his hand.

"Half past kissing time,
And time to kiss again."

The song went on with the sleek hands of Lt. Brackenbury running on the banzo. He went on playing the music under the bright pressure lamp.

"Pretty jolly," Ethel cried, "hang in there, baby!" She stood watching by the young lieutenant's side. "Hey lass, let's be hammered for life on Sunday!" Capt. Butcher said as he entered into the room. Lt. Simpson stomped into the room saying "The Prince is more R than F was, ha, ha, give me the order, I'll riddle his piggish head with leads!"

"But you can't, Captain, the prince is a good fencer, and a capital shoot!" Ethel said turning her face towards the captain.

"Ma'm knows best, a pretty shot, that guy," Lt. Brackenbury said as he stopped playing the banzo.

The gossip became bawdy and she left the room: she tiptoed in the drawing-room in which Quinton was sitting; she saw him playing whist with Mr. Cossins and other officers. Grimwood sat by his side with his arms crossed like a school-boy at the desk. Ethel sneered in the shadow and walked past them. All around the residency there was a hushed silence.

After dinner, Ethel walked with her husband in the garden; the moon-light shone like day-time on the yellow roses and heliotropes and the cluster of roses. The scene appeared pretty as Turner's landscape.

"Frank, I wish I were in my cottage in England," Ethel said as they walked with their hands clasped.

"Had you sailed for home, you might have your time in the spring sunshine in the blue Mediterranean! Now everything turns sour. The Chief has not the least compunction for our personal opinion," Grimwood said in a sad tone. His tone lost much of its pitch.

"But, Frank, believe me, cancellation of the passage is not

unpaying. I will be able to see the most trying day in my life," Ethel said as she rested her head on his shoulder.

The moon rose over the tall peepul trees and the birds squeaked on the branches overhanging on the lake. The young couple walked on the cobbled path of the carriage-drive. Everything all around was calm and quiet. As they neared the northern gate, they heard some noises near the gate. Perhaps the day-light like moonlight had kept some inmates of the residency awake near the gate. A hoarse and shrill cry of the sentry attracted their attention in the stillness of the night.

"Sentry, what's that?" Grimwood said to the sentry. "Who is coming at this hour of the night?"

"Some Manipuris, Saheb, the nautch party, shall I let them enter the gate?" the sentry said in Hindustani.

"No, sentry, it is late, tell them that the Chief Commissioner will not see the nautch to-day, it is late." Grimwood said as he walked towards the gate.

The Grimwood went to their rooms and on the way, they saw Quinton playing whist with his secretary and Col. Skene and some other. The hour struck twelve midnight.

"Take cover in the cellar in case firing breaks out," Grimwood said as he bade goodnight to her. Ethel looked at her husband's face and said, "Poor Moonia, where she could be!" The couple undressed and slipped in sleeping down and they had had wakeful night. The hour struck three o'clock! Ethel woke up her husband and she raced in her little room with shivering coldness in the early March morning; she found the residency like a bee-hive of sepoys in the moon-light. As the dawn came, Lt. Brackenbury left the residency with 30 rifles of the 44 G.R. and after a short interval, Capt. Butcher followed him with 70 rifles and Lt. Luggard with 50 rifles. A three pronged attack on the Yubarajah's residence! Col. Skene and Grimwood followed them behind.

Ethel picked up a gown and scuttled behind Mr. Quinton towards the Telegraph Office at the end of the carriage-drive. Mr. Cossins, the Secretary busied himself with the telegrams. Beikuntha Nath tapped the message to the Government of India about the course of action, failure of the darbar and the arrest of the desparate prince in his own residence by use of force. Quinton sat on the chair with cold sweat on his forehead. Of

course, the bullets crashed into the Telegraph Office through the glass panes! A shower of bullets and cross-fire. The Prince put up a good resistance in the sanggai.

After a good fight, Capt. Butcher captured the Yubarajah's sanggai shooting almost everybody who were found in the place. Prince Tekendrajit escaped through the skirmishes by jumping on his chestnut horse towards the palace and on the way, he saw Prince Angousána, the Senapati rushing towards the scene of fighting.

"What, happened, Yambung?" he shouted to Prince Tekendrajit.

"Who could be! The Engrez siphahis, the traitors who killed a lot of children and women and let me tell you later," the prince replied in haste.

"The Engrez soldiers have occupied the western gate also," he said as they drove along the road. "But we are holding out the gate!"

"Who are holding out the gates?"

"The Wangkehirakpa at the inner gate, Col. Shamu at the southern gate and Yengkhoiba, the Major at the eastern gate," Prince Angousana said as they rode abreast towards the Top Garod.

"Hold out, Senapati, I'm making haste towards the Paonam Hiden and Chirai gate and just now I go information that some Engrez siphahis are sighted crossing the river, see you again," Prince Tekendrajit said as he galloped towards the Paonam Hiden. Chaobhal and Kali rode behind the Prince. The prince dismounted from his horse and levelled his Enfield rifle at the sepoys wading across the river, and pumped leads into them saying, "Hell, you who eat the Engrez salt!" Chaobhal handed his loaded rifle to the prince who knocked down the file of sepoys. Those fell floated in the river, carried by by current of the river.

"Kali, you go quickly to the Top Khana and tell the Top Major to pull out the cannon and let the Engrez see the fun and a good lesson should be taught to the house-breakers!" the prince shouted as he stood aiming his rifle at his waist, and repulsed the troops from the river. But the sporadic shots were heard from the top of the temple of the Brinamchandra; the sepoys had

occupied the temple and took shelter on the top of the temple and began to shoot behind the banisters. The cannon were dragged out of the Top Khanna and the troops above the temple sniped at the kuts dragging the guns. Amidst the shower of bullets, the prince galloped towards the gate at the Top Garod with Chaobhal riding behind him at the neck-break speed through the tree-lined cobble-road.

"They have occupied the top of the temple and once they get hold of the Chirai gate, they will enter into the palace any moment!" shouted the prince. "All Top Menjors should carry the cannon as near as my sanggai!" the prince jumped from his horse and levelled the big gun and a thundering sound sheared the ears; a quick succession of shells followed, the shells whizzed through thick branches of tall peepul trees and tops of houses and landed on the British positions; like inferno the earth shook under the feet and huge chunks of earth hurtled in the sky and darkened the sky above the Yubarajah's sanggai. With clatter of hooves of horses, Tonu Subedar rode on the cobbled path towards the Yubarajah and said "Where is Ipu Thangal?"

"Stuck up somewhere, the old general, although too old won't sit idle and may be disengaging the enemy at the southern gate," the prince said as he fired the cannon.

The prince took a tobacco pipe and sat on a chair and made puffs of smokes. "See the Engrez sepoys, no shots from the British positions save a few shots," the Yubarajah said through his lips, "the fusillade is resumed again. Hark!" "There is still battle, go and tell the Wangkheirakpa and the Yaiskullakpa to attack the British position at the residency from the rear. Not a single soul should escape from the residency. Knock down the stables and kill all the horses in the residency."

Horses clattered on the palace road amidst the sound of cannon shells; the early morning raid killed Dassu Sardar, the Muslim photographer, a fugitive from the Mutiny and all the inmates of his family and their dead bodies were thrown into the burning houses. Khumbong Subedar, Leishang Jamadar and Athokpa Dewan fell fighting in repulsing the British sepoys from the east of the palace. Poor Heikha Chaoba, Tera Mokhongba and a dozen of the Yubarajah's attendants died in the morning raid. The deadly 7-pounders created havoc on the British positions and they had retreated from the temple of the Brinamchandra.

And there was a lull in the afternoon.

"What happened Yubarajah!" the Ayapurel yelled to Prince Tekendrajit amidst the shellings, "the Engrez cannot hold out their position at the sanggai!"

"Just observing Ayapurel," said the prince with puffs of smoke, "No sound of returning fire, seems the Engrez had exhausted all the ammo! No return of fire."

"They shall bow their heads and the last grapeshots have downed all their horses and knocked down the stables in the residency," the prince said in his shrill and vituperative voice. "It is about four O'clock and the shelling had started on the residency and see what happened before the dusk!"

The angry March sun dipped behind the grey smoking ridges of hills in the western skyline and only sporadic shots came from the walls of the palace, amidst shouts of jubilations on the palace walls. Darkness enveloped the town and hooves of horses clattered near the western wall. All the gates had been cleared from the British occupations and the Yubarajah's sanggai was reoccupied by the Yubarajah's sepoy. All the armed lallups and kuts aimed their guns towards the residency and were waiting orders from the Yubarajah to overrun the last British position. "Shall not the vengeance be taken on the Engrez for killing hundreds of innocent men and women in the night in the palace at the time of watching the Ras Lila dance and poor Dassu Sardar and his wife and daughters were shot dead, their bodies thrown into the burning house," one kut shouted with his hand beating his thigh, "we shall see that. The time is not far!"

"They have sounded cease-fire!" they shouted amidst jubilations rising their muskets and rifles. Prince Tekendrajit jumped on his chestnut horse and galloped towards the Top Garod on the tree-lined cobbled-road under the silvery moonlight. Shenbung sounded like the pounding of hearts and dispelled the strange chill after the cessation of the battle. One runner from the residency reported to the western gate and handed over the truce to Prince Angousana, the Senapati who rode towards the Top Garod where Prince Tekendrajit was sitting on a long chair; he appeared quite run down after the battle and his face appeared swarthy under the oil lamp. The scroll of paper ran as "On what condition will you cease firing on us, and give us time to communicate with

the Viceroy, and repair the telegraph?" The prince scanned the lines under the oil-lamp and shouted "Call the royal clerk, where is he?"

The lallups ran almost breathless in their frantic efforts to locate Bamon Charan in his hutment but he was neither seen nor traced. A commotion rose in the palace why the royal clerk should betray the Maharajah when the first sign of danger was smelt in the palace. Almost all the lallups left no stone unturned to trace the trails of the fugitive. But who could read the terms of the truce save the royal clerk? Where could he be now? Prince Tekendrajit thumped the table when he learnt the information that the Maharajah's most trusted secretary vanished under his nose. Who could trust the clerk who walked with the Political Agent and the young lieutenant when they called on the ailing prince to-day and perhaps, the shrewd clerk got the scent from the young Agent saheb! How far could he run from the palace amidst the hostile people?

One turbaned lallup scuttled towards the Top Garod and knocked on the door of the Top Garod without a word and on seeing the prince in a violent temper, he bowed kneeling before the Yubarajah and said, "Yubarajah, the royal clerk was found straggling near the hillock of Chinga and he will arrive in a moment in the palace."

The Maharajah called a war council after getting the cease-fire call from the Chief Commissioner; but the absence of the royal clerk had made all the princes and ministers wait for translation of the truce letter; when Bamon Charan was found out by the lallups near Singjamei, a considerable time had elapsed. Angon Ningthou Girdhari, Col. Shamu, the Luyang Ningthou, Ningthoujamba and the Naharup Lakpa sat quite morose.

The bugle sounded its reply announcing the acceptance of the truce and a call for parley in the palace.

A row started in the council over the number of the dead women and children and all the inmates of Dassu Sardar and burning of more than a dozen houses near the bank of the Imphal river. What more, the jewels of Lord Brinamchandra were looted by Cap. Butcher's sepoy. Those relatives of the dead women and children who attended the Ras'dance last night would clamour for vengeance! Yubarajah Tekendrajit with a

sullen look on his face was tight-lipped and he looked at the whole scene resting his back on the chair and his teeth gritted with signs of distortion on his face.

Maharajah Kullachandra said at last, "It is better to make peace with the sarkar" and he gestured to the Yubarajah and said, "write and no mistake be made Received your letter. I had never any intention to fight with you, but as your troops attacked the palace my men had to fight in self-defence, There is none in my palace who can read and understand English." He stopped and looked at the Yubarajah and said, "Yubarajah, is it not alright?"

"Yambung, all Yambung does is quite alright and final," he said with seriousness.

He continued again, "But as I received your letter immediately after cease-fire, I take it that you want to conclude peace. If your soldiers give up arms, I shall conclude peace with you in a moment. "dated Imphal 14 Chaitra, Saka."

"Where is the royal clerk, let Bama Charan do the job of translating the text into the Bengali," he said in a shaky voice.

Lukramba, the Lallup ran towards the western gate with the letter for the truce and the Yubarajah walked towards the Top Garod in the moon-light. Prince Angousana, the Senapati was already at the gate with Haobam Dewan and said, "Better send one Sardar to the residency." At this, the Dewan turned his face to the Senapati and replied, "Senapati, I will go to the residency to see the Chief Commissioner." The Senapati nodded his head and the Dewan left the gate with Lukramba Lallup and one royal soldier towards the northern gate of the residency. Of course, the road between the western gate and the residency gate was no-man's-land! The moonlight shone through the trees but there was an eerie silence.

The Dewan saw some of the officers near the Treasury Office under the big tree and in the bright moon-light he recognised Mr. Quinton and Mr. Grimwood and the latter said as he approached with a few steps, "Are you not the Dewan?"

"Yes," the Dewan replied, "Agent Saheb".

Grimwood took the letter and had a cursory glance in the moonlight and he read the text to Mr. Quinton who drew nearer

and stood by his side. Of course, the letter was written in Bengali. "Giving up of arms or surrender? What is that, yadi astra shastra faliya diba," Mr. Quinton muttered through his lips. Mr. Cossins stepped near Grimwood and both repeated delivering the text of the letter in English. "What is 'surrender' in Bengali?" Mr. Quinton quipped anxiously looking at the letter and he showed sullenness in his tone.

"Surrendering of arms, Sir," said Cossins.

"Sir, it seems cease-fire," Mr. Grimwood muttered through his teeth and looked at the letter quite ill at ease.

Lt. Chatterton, Staff officer to Col. Skene stood behind the latter and watched the scene in silence.

"Better clarify the meaning from the Yubarajah, is he not at the western gate?" Quinton asked quite anxiously and he pointed his hand towards the gate.

"Will the Yubarajah see any of us, Dewan?" said Mr. Grimwood.

"Of course, he will, Sahib," the Dewan said nodding his head.

"Do you think it safe for us now to go to Yubarajah?" Mr. Quinton said abruptly.

"No fear about that, Sir," Grimwood said in reply and turned towards the Dewan, "Can you swear that no danger will befall us if we go there?"

"We revere you as Gods, Sahib! Why should we harm you?" came the reply.

"Sir, he is one of the distinguished followers of Yubarajah belonging to his family. When he gives us assurance I don't see any objection to go," Mr. Grimwood said to his boss who stood looking blank, and felt unconvinced.

The Dewan left with the lallup and the kut walked behind. Mr. Quinton also pushed off behind them. Col. Skene called the bugler and said, "Sepoy, bring chairs, we will be at the point between the northeast of the residency and the western gate!"

The Dewan walked ahead and immediately on his arrival at the western gate, he told the Senapati that Chief Commissioner and his party had arrived for the parley. Within a few minutes, Mr. Quinton arrived and Col. Skene told the bugler to keep the chairs near the gate while he was arranging for entry into the

gate. He saw some kuts standing at the gate and said, "May we go inside for the parley?"

Senapati Angousana walked towards him and said, "None of your business, you chap!"

Col. Skene withdrew and looked at the Senapati quite helpless. At this juncture, General Thangal came to the scene bending his body over his sword like a walking stick and intervened by saying "Senapati, it is no good to allow the sahibs to make entry into the palace in such a boiling situation, and you see the people have become furious over the killing of women and children last night."

"General Saheb, the Yubarajah has allowed the sahibs to enter into the palace for the parley," Yengkhoiba said to the Senapati. Nilamani, the Ayapurel Major saw the party and walked in haste to usher in the sahebs while Haobam Dewan looked at the scene from the side of the road. Mr. Quinton and his party walked led by the Ayapurel and General Thangal towards the band-shed near the darbar-hall. Kuts emerged from the darkness and followed the party. The darbar being closed, the parley was held in front of the darbar. Giridhari, the Angom Ningthou, Col. Shamu, the Luwang Ningthou, Haobam dewan and Chongtha Mia arrived at the scene.

Yubarajah Tekendrajit, inspite of the day's happening engineered by the tight-lipped Quinton was weighed down by a heavy thought and he said to himself the work had already started, the long cherished task, antagonising the Sarkar. His sepoys were, of course, trained under Dassu Sardar and a host of native officer who deserted the Sarkar since Sir Chandrakirti. But Dassu Sardar who brought the rose from Ethel was a thing which he could not forget in his life. She was an angel with blue eyes. her timely message with the rose saved him from being mauled by the toughs of the Sarkar. Of course, he could save himself; he had one loaded pistol and one doubled edged knife concealed under his blue velvet jacket. His mind was filled with her image; he sniffed unconsciously the cool spring breeze; it was sweet and it felt like life itself; the breeze that he sniffed on that night on the machan; it had the aroma and the scent from Ethel's golden hair. Now it was quite different situation, piquant and inept. He walked fast towards the shadowy figures pacing under the shadowy moonlight. He felt himself too weak but his determination made

him strong and invincible; his head swayed but he could compose himself.

Mr. Quinton, Grimwood and his party sat on the chairs; the bugler and the lallups were arranging the chairs in front of the bajhai-shang, the band-hut near the darbar hall. The prince paced towards the Chief in his usual fashion with his head held high and his powerful legs regaining his superb strength; the moon lit like the day. With a smile, he stretched his hand out and said "Kammeson Saheb and Agent saheb, goodevening." With a smile he said, "Saheb sub thik hai, Agent saheb, is Memsahab alright!" With clasped hands, Mr. Grimwood said with his lips quivering and sensing the guilt, "Memsahib is alright, Your Royal Highness, and you are quite alright?"

The prince gestured to Mr. Quinton and Grimwood to have their seats on the chairs and to start the parley. All sat tight-lipped; the prince saw the old General's hawkish face thrusting out over his prey and his shrunken eyes popped out and gestured to the prince to start the parley. The latter looked at the Chief Commissioner and then at Grimwood and he saw the face of Col Skene averting his eyes and he, all of sudden said, "Your Excellency, now we have come to the table, it is a matter very much regretted; it is because the Chief Commissioner has done very unkindly " He stopped and heaved a long sigh and he became almost suffocated with the anguish and he continued, "this day's undeclared attack on my residence has ruined the friendship between the Maharajah of Manipur and the Sarkar that had existed from a long time! What have we not acquiesced with your request! the Chief Commissioner said we were moving to Tammu, we kept four hundred coolies ready and then suddenly the Kammeson sahib says we are going to Kohima, and the Kammeson says we want to see the Ras dance, we showed the dance but, your military officer, the Colonel attacked my sanggai, residence while all the inmates were all asleep and so many houses of my people had been burnt down. I know you had the intention to kill me also!"

There was an abrupt and eerie silence and the prince was almost blinding with rage and he looked on heaving long sighs and his head swayed. He said again, "You wanted to kill the Maharajah and all the people but you stopped only because you couldn't! You burned the villages at Chinangkhoṅgnang. What

have the Meiteis committed any crime! You want battle and we don't trust you! Your words cannot be relied on as you only pretended friendship in order to gain time. You invited His Highness and all the princes to the darbar while you arranged everything for my arrest! So Kammeson Sahib, you are to surrender all your arms at the residency so that a darbar could be held now. Without this we cannot sit for the parley."

Mr. Quinton listened to the Yubarajah's words looking at his face without blinking his eyes and he said with a slow voice, "Yubarajah Sahib, let us forget everything. Past is past, there will be no war between us and we are going to Kohima and no hostility and no more. Let us be friends again!"

General Thangal bawled out "If Kammeson sahib does not intend war, let all the arms be surrendered to the Maharajah of Manipur and all these arms shall not be forfeited and will be returned to you later."

Mr. Quinton denied flatly swaying his head, "General Sahib, the arms belong to the Government of India, we can't surrender the arms because we are not yet defeated!"

Tekendrajit rose from the chairs and said, "Your Excellency, if you don't surrender your arms, there is no need to hold the parley, so good night!" The prince almost shouted with his usual grand tone and left the place without a word; he suddenly returned and said, "Senapati, let these sahibs be escorted up to the gate." After saying this he paced towards the Top Garod and behind him walked the old general bending his frail body over the sword. Mr. Quinton and Grimwood sat looking towards the Prince with immeasurable anxiety and sorrows and it took minutes for the sahibs to rise from the chairs. They looked each other and Quinton looked at Grimwood who averted his red eyes and then he nodded his head quite unconsciously. At last he gestured to Col. Skene who was almost blind at the failure of the parley. He cursed why he had endangered himself in such a trap and with paralysed legs they rose and followed Senapati Angousana and Giridhari, the Angom Ningthou on the cobbled path while the fourteenth day moon made patterns on the road. Quite oblivious of the scene, spring birds twittered.

Mr. Quinton, to his surprise saw that rows of men with long spears and muskets standing on either side of the cobbled road

and among them, he saw some white turbaned civilians who stood in groups with menacing steps. He followed Giridhari, the Angom Ningthou and the Senapati with quick steps without looking back, his fists clenched and cold sweat on his forehead, he looked aside towards Col. Skene and said in a subdued tone, "Colonel, don't look back and walk quite unconcerned and also don't look at them in their faces to evade anger!" "Nothing would happen, Sir, the natives are" Col. Skene said within his lips. As they approached the gate in front of the Top Garod, the mob closed in, some moved near the gate. "Hatlo, kill the sahibs!" cried a young man near the gate. A commotion suddenly rose near the gate; sounds of flying brickbats hitting the road broke the silence and a stone flew towards the white men pacing frantically on the dark road. The Angom Ningthou said, "Hey, oh, sons of soil, I am acting under the orders of the Yubarajah to escort the sahibs, hey, hey, don't do any harm, that is not decent!" Only a few yards from the gate, the black turbaned kuts and some civilians brandishing bamboos approached towards the party and surrounded them and some struck Mr. Quinton with butts of their rifles. The Angom Ningthou shouted in vain not to touch the bodies of the sahibs raising his hands. "Where is the Senapati?" he cried but he saw nobody to help him. The infuriated mob encircled the party. The Angom Ningthou stood quite helpless. "Hatlo, hatlo, we want to kill the sahibs who killed our mothers, sisters and children, don't let them escape from the palace," shouted a young man hysterically. The great door slammed against the face of Mr. Quinton. The Angom Ningthou pushed the gate but he stood quite helpless and he looked at Mr. Quinton who stood dumbfounded.

Turning to Col. Skene, Quinton stood looked aghast but spoke nothing and then he glanced at Grimwood who looked at him. He averted his eyes to encounter his face; he saw the Angom Ningthou trying frantically to knock the big wooden gate with both his hands but to no effect. "What is all this, why they close the door! The matter shall be reported to the Yubarajah," he said to himself. The crowd grew bigger but he could not recognise their faces save Kajao. He raised his hands to ward off the hands raising to strike the white men. "Ah me, what is all this, where is Ushaba, the Lallup Chingba?" he said to himself, "ah me, ah me!" "Where is the Yubarajah? Where is the Yubarajah?" "To hell with the Yubarajah sitting in the darbar!" Ushaba shouted

from the crowd. "Ah you, come here, let us try to escort the sahibs to safe places!" the Angom Ningthou appealed in a hysterical voice.

"Where," Mr. Quinton said to him and walked quite unconsciously following the Angom Ningthou. "Come, sahibs, to the darbar," he cried in a shaky voice as he shoved and pushed the mob. But he became helpless as the mob surrounded the party.

Cries of "Hatlo, hatlo!" became shriller and shriller and became more threatening; the mob followed the party with more menacing steps; Kajao took a more menacing step towards the young Agent who walked behind with the Gurkha bugler and with raised spear he shouted, "Vengeance should be taken on the white sahibs who shot down the innocent children and men and women who came to the Ras dance last night," and he advanced with two or three steps and shouted at the ears of Mr. Grimwood, "You, young Agent, you are responsible, everything happened under your nose! Revenge for killing women and children!" Angom Ningthou raised his arms and checked the advance of the mob saying "Kajao, what you are up to, are you a young chap, don't you see they are sahibs, what would happen if anything happens to them!" Kajao stepped back with his mouth agape holding his spear in the air. The crowd hemmed in all around Mr. Quinton and Mr. Grimwood and his party raising their hands; the lallups with swords drawn and rifles in their hands followed the whitemen as they struggled towards a more safe place. Angom Ningthou cried, "Jatra Singh, where are you? Come soon and open the darbar!" He turned back and pushed the crowd but he could not: "Stop my countrymen, it's the Yubarajah's hukum that I am to see for the safety of the sahibs," he shouted at the approaching mob, "is there not any lallup to tell the Yubarajah that I am overpowered by the mob and I have become quite helpless!" "Jatra Singh, Jatra Singh, where are you, why don't open the door of the darbar!"

Mr. Quinton went up on the stairs of the darbar and Mr. Cossins, his secretary followed behind raising his arms protecting his boss; Mr. Grimwood stood gazing at the crowd quite helpless; he turned aside and saw Kajao raising his spear and another turbaned lallup with a sword brandishing about to strike; he turned his face to avert his eyes. But the cries of "Hatlo, hatlo!" rang more menacing. Jatra Singh pushed the closed door of the

darbar hall with his hands and shoulders but the cries became more threatening. Almost about four hundred turbaned heads jostled and pushed in the moonlight near the stairs. Nepra, one black turbaned kut slid from the crowd with his hand on the hilt of his sword and watched at the white men standing on the steps of the stairs with his teeth gritting while the mob struggled on their feet to come forward; Kajao jumped and danced on the other side of the stairs holding his spear. The door gave away and Mr. Quinton put his foot inside the hall and Mr. Cossins almost stumbled just at the door step. One lallup struck Col. Skene on his arm with his sword and he almost slumped and Nepra, the kut shouted and pushed Mr. Grimwood away from the stairs and fell headlong on the other side of the stairs before Kajao and he looked at the dancing spear with its glinting colour in the silvery moonlight. Kajao pushed his spear on his chest who raised his hands to ward off the onslaught. He fell with his face facing the ground and wriggled under the stairs quite unconsciously. The mob cried, "Kill, kill!" The Gurkha bugler raised the bugle and tried to sound alarm but a heavy shield hit him on his face and the bugle fell on the ground. The Angom Ningthou and Jatra Singh slammed the door and later supported the colonel and he tore off a piece of clothe from his turban and bandaged the wound on the face of the white who bled profusely from a gashing wound.

Tekendrajit emerged from the crowd with a walking stick in his hand and behind him followed the old general and went up the stairs in quick succession; he turned towards the Angom Ningthou and said "There are only three sahibs where are the other two?" He looked quite helplessly and said, "The Agent Saheb was wounded by the mob and fell from the stairs. The prince saw Lt. Simpson under the stairs and he rose him from the ground and went up the stairs supporting him.

The mob closed in again and shouted "Hatlo, hatlo!" The prince waved his hand sporting a walking stick and shouted at the mob not to do anything to demean the white men. On seeing him on the stairs with old Thangal, the mob moved near the stairs and said, "Yubarajah, why so many women and children and innocent men who came to attend the Ras were butchered last night, we want to hear you! We want your words, why so many men were being killed during you and your brother's rule.

No such things happened in other times!" "You can't do anything against the sahebs, they are the guests of the Maharajah!" cried the Yubarajah raising both hands. From the corner of the crowd came a shrieking cry, "We won't cremate dead bodies of our mothers and children until we take revenge upon the wrong-doers!" "We want to kill the sahebs, hatlo, hatlo, kill the sahebs. And if we cannot take revenge for our dead relatives we shall kill you two, the Yubarajah and the old man!" The Yubarajah turned towards the Angom Ningthou and said, "Angom Ningthou, please see that the sahebs are quite secure." He left the scene with the old man towards Top Garod.

Jatra Singh gave a glass of water to the man whose head was bandaged by a piece of turban; Mr. Cossins asked his name bending his head and scribbled his name, on a piece of paper with a pencil. The Angom Ningthou paced quite unconsciously in the hall, only one lantern lit the big hall in the centre of the three white men while the Gurkha bugler sat on the floor in the corner. Quite tired by the exertion in shoving the angry mob, he sat on the edge of a chair and he wiped out the sweat from his forehead and suddenly he rose from the chair and looked at the three white men sitting on the chairs in a closed circle. Their frightened faces looked a gory look. "Jatra Singh," he called to him, "look after the sahebs, I am sending some sentries over here." Jatra Singh said nothing but turned his face towards him as he saw him leaving the hall silently. Within a few minutes, Ushaba, the Lallup Chingba arrived at the hall with seven other sentries. Yengkhoiba walked behind the sentries. Hida Chaobi kept watch on the white men in the hall and Jatra Singh left the hall. He found that the mob was no longer outside the hall save some sepoy walking on the road near the gate of the Top Garod. An eerie silence reigned in the night and the moon shone like a fiery tale. He wondered where could all the four thousand lallups stay during the whole night and what would happen after the killing of Grimwood, the Political Agent!

He looked back and saw the body of Grimwood lying lifeless under the stairs in the moon light and paced towards the Top Garod. He walked tiptoed on the floor of the Garod and peeped through the door which was almost ajar and saw the Yubarajah sitting with other ministers in the Garod. Col. Shamu and General Thangal and some other ministers sitting around. All seemed

tired and weighed down by that day's unusual incident. Of course, they had not one minute's rest after the morning raid on the Yubarajah's sanggai!

Jatra Singh entered into the Garod in the dim-lit hall and he saw the Yubarajah resting his head on his hand; he seemed quite tired and the old general sat on the chair bending his body on the table. "Strike the iron when hot, Ningthem, another time so golden will never come again, the sahebs enter into the den out of their accord! Who could believe it! What the puranas say, five heads will fall on the altar of the dragons! We have to propitiate our ancient Gods and deities, for the welfare of the land, for the glory of the Maharajah! Ningthem, give orders, have we not taken pledge at the Lambal village that we should drive out the sarkar! Ningthem, just remember, you and I standing before the astute James Johnstone before his table beseeching his pardon, for a prince and just remember the exile to the hellish island of Thanga, it is the sarkar! If you strike now, you will be crowned with success and no other time, Ningthem. Give your hukum that I am waiting to carry it out. I, who had served the six generations of Maharajahs and I, who am standing now against time to wait and see the overthrow of the sarkar and if I die now, I am quite happy, I am waiting Ningthem to do my last job, that is the over-throw of the sarkar and establish a free land and Ningthem give your hukum! And I carry out just now! Now and then never!"

The old general sank and threw his head on the back of the chair watching the Yubarajah.

"The Sarkar will not be slow for rescue of the Kammeson Saheb and other officers, tomorrow, a darbar will be held with the Maharajah and all ministers" the Yubarajah said in a soft tone.

"But Ningthem, no friendship could be made with the Sarkar, Ningthem, better strike the iron when hot", the old general said protruding his eyes. Tears and water filled his shrunken eyes and noses.

"Ipu," the prince said and looked at the face of the old general whose eyes twinkled, moistened with tears, "but Ipu a darbar could be held next day!"

The Yubarajah turned his face away from the old man and

threw himself on the chair with his hand touching his forehead. The old man came nearer and touched his shoulder and turned the Yubarajah's face towards his in the dim light of the lantern. He peered into his eyes and encountered his eyes.

"Ningthem, have I not been the royal attendant since Maharajah Gambhir Singh?" the old man said wiping his tears.

"Ipu!"

"Ningthem, speak up, do you think that your Ipu will lead you to infamy, exile and hell!"

The prince did not move his lips but quivered.

"Ningthem, I know your silence gives the answer!" the old man continued turning his face away from the prince. "I am old! I am old! I am old! Tell the world that General Thangal, Prime Minister to the Maharajah, six generations of Maharajahs, an old man called Thangal, may be a general, a prime minister, did conspire to throw a prince who grew on his back into disgrace! Did I conspire! Did I conspire!"

The old general threw himself on a chair and put his hand supporting his head and he became silent. He dabbed his silk skirt on his lips to remove water running from his mouth.

"Ningthem, you shall not take an old man's words, a mere dotage, yes, Ningthem, it is true it is a mere dotage!" the old man said sobbing like a child.

"Ipu," the prince said as he came near the old man and touched his shoulders, "we had our pledge also and the humiliation of the Maharajah at the darbar, a slap on the face of every Manipuri and on the nation!"

"Sanaton, have you forgotten the pledge at the village of Lambal? I ask you one simple question, Ningthem?"

"Ipu, no, a definite no!" the prince replied thumping the table with his fist, "no never, Ipu, no, no!"

"Sanaton, did I not tell you I was too old to carry the burden of the state on my shoulders when you, Ningthem, you besought me, Ipu, without you how I could rule a country at a time when Yambung Surchandra, the Maharajah abdicated the throne and when Yambung Kullachandra, the Yubarajah denied to make a triumphal entry into the palace, at a time, at a time, the throne

was vacant! I wanted to return my blood-soaked sword to the palace armoury and proceed to Sri Sri Brindaban on pilgrimage!" the old man said with tears running down his wrinkled face and he wiped his nose running with water.

"Ipu, a darbar could save us, " the prince muttered.

"But, Sanaton, now and then never, better live a free man for two days rather than be slaves for ever! Now and then never!" the old man said turning his face towards the prince, "the Sarkar won't forgive us for killing the Agent Saheb and we, we should not also forgive the sarkar for humiliation of our God, our Maharajah on Sunday before the residency darbar! Strike the iron when it is hot, Ningthem!

"Sanaton, I won't throw you into disgrace!" the old man continued with his silk robes putting on his shoulders as he rose from the chair.

"Ipu, do what you think best!" the Yubarajah said putting his hand on the sword-hilt and he sprung from the chair with a jerk and he turned to the old general and said, "Ipu, now I shall go to see the cannon on the walls and tell all the hands to make ready for the assault."

The Yubarajah paced towards the door of the Garod tapping his shoes on the floor and outside the court-room he saw the moon-light playing on the tree lined gardens and straight roads; he saw Jatra Singh, the Phourungba standing near the verandah talking to a sentry. He climbed the broken wall just at the back of the Top Garod and paced with haste towards the south-western corners of the wall; some sardars almost raced behind him. On the western wall, sepoy's carrying rifles took positions and a considerable number of kuts and lallups clustered near the outer wall. The Yubarajah went up the stairs to the embrasure on the wall and on seeing him the sardars knelt before him. "Sardars, have you kept all cannon ready?" he said as he walked towards the guns and the Sardars ran to man the guns. "First knock down the residency darbar," he said and turned the barrel of the cannon towards the darbar and he left towards the southern gate.

The old general gripped the sword-hilt and rose from the chair and paced with quick steps outside the Top Garod and he stood resting on the wall for a while and inhaled the fresh spring breeze

which invigorated himself like a young man; he sensed that the youth in him came all of a sudden. He shouted, "Jatra Singh, Phourungba, where is Ushaba, the Lallup Chingba?"

Jatra Singh bowed his head and said, "General, he is keeping watch on the sahibs in the darbar hall and any hukum, general sahib?"

"Well, Ushaba, the Lallup chigba Chingba is there in the darbar hall, well, well, I myself will go there and you don't leave the Top Garod until the Yubarajah returns" the general said and walked towards the darbar.

"Ushaba," the old man cried with his hoarse voice like his old days, "come here,"

Ushaba bowed his head and waited to hear his words.

"Now Ushaba, it is needless to wait time, saheb lokki machil thupchillo!" said the old general as he stood erect, "the heads of the four sahebs should be chopped off before the two dragons, well, you go, arrange everything, go ahead!"

Ushaba stood dumb-founded and gazed on the old general's face mute and silent. His eyes twitched in wonder and he said, "Those sahibs! Ipu, who gave hukum to execute all the sahibs?"

"Who are you to say like that!" the old general bawled out looking at Ushaba's face in total amazement.

"Ipu general, I cannot carry out the hukum! Many a time I was put into disgrace when I carried out your hukum!" Ushaba said in reply "without Yubarajah's hukum, I cannot".

"You go and confirm yourself from the Yubarajah, you go, you go and come back after getting the Yubarajah's words," the old general said with heaves of sigh, "don't waste time here, you go to the Yubarajah."

It was 10 o'clock in the night but no chiming in the residence.

Ushaba left the place leaving the old general at the place towards the Top Garod. He met Jatra Singh before the Top Garod and he went to him and said, "Jatra, where is the Yubarajah?"

Jatra Singh pointed his hand towards the south western corner of the palace and said, "Just inspecting the kuts and lallups for the battle."

The old general walked in the moon-light with agitation and

uneasiness and he clenched his fists and then he gripped the sword-hilt crying "Where are the lallups and sardars?" He saw some lallups walking in the moon-light talking about the Holi festival on the next day; the old man said, "Who are you, hey lallups, don't you hear me?"

The two lallups came near the old general and bowed their heads and said, "Ipu general any hukum?"

"What are your names?" said the old man.

"Okramba and Leishangthemba lallups just strolling in the moonlight, general saheb," the lallup said with meekness

"Have you any duty?"

"No, general saheb," the lallups replied.

"Well, you go to Dhana Singh, the executioner, you know his house, go quickly and just wait, he should come with all his equipments and on the eay, tell all the hands for the execution also, you do listen?" the old man said with his usual peremptoriness, and he stood erect with his hands clasped behind his back.

"Are you not Ushaba," the old man said as he returned with Jatra Singh, "Yes, what the Yubarajah said to you? Just give me his words without anything amiss."

Ushaba went to the old man and stood facing him and said, "The Yubarajah will come in half an hour and he said not to do such things. He talks the matter with you!"

The old general stood aghast and shouted back, "The Yubarajsh is a fool and don't you know there is no hope of reconciliation with the sahebs and what is the use of saying like this!"

Ushaba left the place and went to the darbar hall and he found that all the sahibs were bound in chains on their legs. He went towards the eastern side of the hall and found that no sentry was posted there and he shouted "Where are you sentries, there is no sentry here, come at once!" Then he strolled in the moonlight in such a manner as to shirk all burdens and he threw himself on the ground and rested his back on a nearby tree. He found himself nauseating with the idea of executing all the sahibs. He looked towards the two white dragons shining in the moonlight. He saw some unknown lallups moving on the road. Said he, "These simpleton lallups will die of tiredness, carrying out the old

general's errands!" Quite tired he took a siesta in the March breeze in the moon-light drenched landscape.

The sounds of approaching sepoy's woke him from the nap and he sprung from the ground and ran towards them. He knew that it was the Yubarajah who emerged from the Koutumba gate and he paced in haste to join them. The Yubarajah walked towards the Top Garod and on the way he met the old general and said, "Ipu, is it that Ipu had ordered execution of all the sahebs?"

The old man said yes and he talked to the Yubarajah in his old man-like manner in a faint and soft tone. Ushaba waited at a distance and listened to what they talked. But the March breeze came suddenly and nothing heard save the noise of flying young leaves. He looked back and saw Chaobhal standing near him.

The Yubarajah entered into the Top Garod while the old general walked towards Ushaba and shouted, "All sardars and lallups make yourself ready, and prepare for the execution of the three sahebs and the bugler, hurry up!"

Yengkhoiba rushed to the hall and said, "The sahebs are now to be handed over to the executioner. Satwal and Dhana, the executioner stood near the stairs while Yaima, the royal blacksmith went inside the hall with his iron-chains.

The white men were led outside the hall while Laishraba and Nepra came out with a lantern and walked behind the doomed men through a door towards the two dragons. About twenty Sardars and lallups attended the execution and all stood watching the job. With a thud, the executioner chopped off Mr. Quinton's head which rolled off, and he picked it up and put on a bamboo basket, and then he did with Mr. Cossins and then with Lt. Simpson and then with the bugler. The priest took all the heads and propitiated before the white dragons by smearing blood on the white stone legs.

After the execution, the kuts and lallups rushed towards the western wall and with cupped hands on their mouth they cried, "Chief Kammeson amuk hallak laroi! chief Kammeson amuk hallak laroi! The Chief Commissioner will not return again!" The Yubarajah and the general paced towards the south-western corner of the wall and went up the stairs to the embrasure; the old general followed him sporting a tobacco pipe and he himself went near the cannon and looking up to the Yubarajah, he said,

"Sanaton, the Yubarajah must inaugurate shelling of the bangalow! Direct on the bangalow!"

The prince looked in silence and he twitched his eyes and said, "Ipu, to fire the cannon on the house of a young lady and on the cluster of roses!"

"Sanaton, it is the war!" the old looked at the Prince with meaningful eyes, "Sanaton, please inaugurate the first shell. The rest will be done by the Sardars."

The prince said to himself, "On the riot of roses and the house in which Ethel is sleeping!" And without a word he clenched his hands and moved towards the cannon. Deafening sounds sheared the ears and a sudden flash appeared in the residency through the branches of deodar and peepul trees.

Old Thangal looked at the scene with puffs of smokes from the tobacco pipe in his hand and he almost danced with joy in the moonlight. He cried "All sons of the soil, wreak vengeance on the sarkar for the wrong done to your near and dear ones! Show your courage! The Yubarajah will give you handsome bakshish and free rations of rice. Jatra Singh, the Phourungba shall distribute rice right from the dawn and five silver coins per head! Ha, ha, kuts and sardars and lallups, attack the residency!" The old man went near the cannon with the tobacco pipe sporting in his hand and fired the cannon towards the bangalow; the shell whizzed in the moonlit night and blew off the roof of the bangalow. Shells showered on the bangalow ceaselessly.

The moon emerged from the black clouds and shone like daytime. The old general stood watching the tongues of flames leaping from the building. All appeared quiet and the moon disappeared among the clouds again.

"Sanaton, it's half past twelve, the Engrez morning, the royal sepoy rose from their beds quite early the morning to bid farewell to the sahebs!" the old general said.

"But, Ipu, no return of fire from the British position!" the Yubarajah shouted to the old general.

"The Engrez are having break-fasts," came the reply from the old man, as he made puffs of smoke.

"Come Sardars and kuts, let us attack the residency!" the Yubarajah cried in his usual grand tone. "The British sepoy had

fled or dugged in the cellars." He jumped on his chestnut horse and rode ahead the royal soldiers and on the way he met Senapati Angousana and said, "Senapati, come with some kuts to the residency! They have had run, I guess!"

Kuts slid down the western wall and some rushed from the western gate shouting their war-cries. "Jai, jai, Durga Mataki jai, Yubarajah Ki Jai, Yubarajah ki jai!" They made a mad rush towards the Treasury Office near the northern gate and ransacked the Agent's office at the gate. Yubarajah Tekendrajit and Angousana arrived at the scene and stopped looting the treasury of the sarkar.

The Yubarajah trotted along the carriage-drive on his chestnut horse; the moon-light made florid patterns on the road and with a heavy heart he trotted along; how many times he walked along the drive. He sat on his horse gazing at the fire that created havoc on the little cosy boudoir of Ethel; all seemed like a chimera. The royal sepoy even up-rooted the flowers from the flower-beds. The prince muttered through his lips, flower does no evil. The sepoy ransacked the remaining portion of the bangalow still left by fire without any damage. One kut picked up the portrait of Ethel in her wedding-dress and some others ran towards him and smashed the frame into pieces. They pulled down the long poll with Union Jack and tore it into pieces. The prince looked at the stack of woods and planks where Ethel's bed-room was there. He then looked at the little drawing-room where she received him only a few days' ago! "Poor Ethel, where she could be now may be among the debris or on the dusty road looking back towards her dwelling house smouldering in smokes," he said to himself as he paced on the well-mowed lawn now littered with debris and he looked at the rose-bed but it was in ruins. The shells did havocs on the garden too. He saw the kuts scrambled for the heads of the British sepoy and came across the dead body of Lt. Brackenbury lying on the ground in the backyard with a white sheet on his body.

Tekendrajit stood quite dazed on the havoc created on the rose-beds and Ethel's small boudoir and he grasped for breaths. The spring moon-light painted the scene of devastation with its palish colour of the ruin and death. "Sanaton, Sanaton," shouted old Thangal as he sat on his bay horse. The Senapati did not listen quite deafened by the shell firing. It was the moment of

sadness, sighs and torments of love. Thangal, riding on his horse came near and he patted on his shoulders. He looked back quite in surprise and looked at the old general with his mouth gaping in consternation. Both sat on the horses quite dazed. The old man moistened his eyes and around the residency buildings and the darbar were engulfed in towering fire. The two looked at each other without any words. The Senapati was transfixed by the lightning. It was a moment then the two spoke only by their eyes and hearts. The old general rode away without saying any words and he said to himself as he rode away on his bay horse, "Indeed the prince has had a tale with the memsahib, the prince and the rose!" The old general cantered on the carriage-drive whistling a music as sweet as the spring breeze. Never had he sung on the residency compound like that before.

Tekendrajit left the place on his chestnut horse quite unhappy. The horse carried him through the residency garden in the moonlight. He whipped his horse as he rode near the gate of the residency. He rode on the road along the palace moat. On the way he saw thousands of kuts swarming around the residency. It was almost morning. He rode towards the white cottage where Maipakpi lived. He dismounted from his horse and went to the door and listened to the voice inside the room. "Maipakpi, Maipakpi," he called softly as he used to calling her and his ears tuned to the soft footsteps treading on the floor for opening the door at the unusual hour. With a creaking sound, the door opened and she came out of the door with an oil-lamp in her hand. The prince raised her veil. He saw tears on her cheeks as they looked at each other.

Kneeling she bowed her head. "Sanakhwa, what is thy command at this hour of the night!" she said looking at the prince's face who stood leaning his body with his hand resting on the side of the door.

"Poor maid, the shells did disturb your beautiful dream!" the prince said softly, "of course, you could blame none other than me, your Yubarajah!"

Maipakpi sobbed with tears on her face, the birds chirped because their sleep was also broken by the sounds of the cannon. She rested her head on the prince's bosom, and the latter did not say any word as they stood near the door for quite a long time. And they then entered into the room in embrace. The prince sat

on a chair with his sword putting beside him. The oil light flickered near her bed-side table. Her eyes shone behind her thick black jets of hairs and looked at his face closely.

"Sanakhwa, Sanakhwa," she said softly peering at his eyes with dropps of tears racing down her smooth white cheeks. "Where is the Memsahib!"

"The bird has flown! Life is just fun."

The prince looked in the darkness without a word; he was absorbed in some thought, an unhappy episode or some scene on that night. She said, "What happened to the memsahib, is she dead?" She looked at his eyes but she saw his eyes moistened with tears; he turned his face away from her averting her eyes. She watched the red flame of the oil lamp with her fingers on her lips and sensed that her heart that was burning inside her bosom was like the fire that consumed the oil. Suddenly, the Yubarajah rose from the chair and said, "Maipakpi, I come here to say something to you, the war has broken out and more danger is in sight in near future."

"Sanakhwa, a maiden's fate is no less than that of flower that blossoms on a hill top on a windy day, and an orphan like me is like a creeper that has no tree nearby," she said with sobs, "like chingda shatpa ingellei, kayana chinnadana kenkhido. Sanakhwa!"

"I have decided to send you to a village quite safe from the ravages of the war," the prince said to her, and he looked at her face hidden by the thick jets of hairs. He said again smoothing her hairs, "could we wed now, it is too late now!"

The dawn broke out with the streaks of golden rays; her tears shone in the daylight more and she did not utter any word but her tears spoke more eloquently.

"Sanakhwa, I am almost an orphan and I shall stay in the palace in a humble hut till the end" she said with tears in her eyes.

"As you wish, Maipakpi," the Yubarajah said as he rose from the chair and he walked heavily in his martial dress outside the room. He mounted on his horse and galloped off.

Bamon Charan, the Royal clerk after his desertion from the palace attended the office more punctually and he had to keep himself vigil late in the night and he had to write petitions to the

Governor-general for the recent break-out of the battles. With a white chaddar on his shoulders and a string of rudraksha on his necks, he walked on the verandah of his office tapping his sandals on the floor, he fumed and fussed in the dry spring breeze. He muttered to himself "The young Agent was kind-hearted and well-meaning but the tragedy issued from the unconvincing Quinton who denied any suggestions, of course, it was the young Agent who hinted to me that the flare-up would occur in no time!"

In his usual gaits, the Yubarajah came on the red, brick path sporting an ivory walking-stick and stomped into the office saying, "Bama, the matter had proceeded too far, what to do now, Bama, you just read the petition to the Governor-General "

'Yubarajah Saheb, no mortal being could help the Maharajah this time save Lord Govinda' the royal clerk said with a pathetic look in his face and he said to himself "Of course, the saying goes, the khanghi tree just is going to catch fire on its end!"

Ushaba sat on the stool in front of the Top Garod like one possessed, he was in a feverish trance because of the gruelling traumatic experience at the execution of Quinton and his three other followers. He watched at the long queue of kuts and lallups before the royal godown. What the Yubarajah is up to! Kuts and lallups are given five shining silver coins and five miruks of rice, and it is a spectacle not ever seen before!

The sound of galloping of horses rattled the ground beneath and he turned back and saw Niranjan Subedar riding one horse with royal sepoy behind him and among them Tonu Subedar also followed the party on his horse. Ushaba drew breaths as he felt nauseating and the endless stream of prisoners of war trudging on the road, past the Top Garod. Veiled women and old men carried the collins of the dead kuts and lallups who fell fighting in the Yubarajah's sanggar. Of the prisoners of war Rashid Lal the residency Clerk trugged along the road behind Ashutosh Mukherjee who hid his head with a woollen muffler. Berkuntha Nath, the signaller and Dhani Ram Lt. Simpson's syce followed the train hanging their faces low. Of them, Lakshaman Prasad, the Hospital assistant had a carefree look.

Niranjan Subedar watched the prisoners march^{ed} past the Top Garod and he stood erect on his horse almost standing with a

grin on his face and said, "Sure, some more heads in front of the dragons!"

Moirang Atonjao appeared on the scene and with a jovial look, he went near the prisoners and patted on the doctor's shoulders and said, "You, physician are quite lucky for the Yubarajah is, as you know quite kind-hearted and benevolent too, not yet born anywhere in other kingdoms "

"What happened, Moirang Atonjao, why you have spoken in such a grand way. I hope this battle has tipped you to a higher post?" Ushaba said jokingly.

"Of course, of course, Ushaba, you rot in the Top Garod as Lallup Chingha!" said Atonjao, "you see the Yubarajah has decided to free all the prisoners and give them rice and travel expenses for their home journey."

"The Yubarajah will drive out almost all the Engrez siphahis from this land and I hope, he is also going to drive them from other kingdoms also, and so the Yubarajah is sending all the Indians free with provisions and silver coins to send the message to all Indian princes!" Niranjan Subedar said with a smile on his face.

In the weeks that followed without anybody's waiting, the dusty roads saw the old men and women leaving their homes carrying bundles of clothes and all their belongings to distant outlying villages. But where could they go! News of three British columns marching towards the palace flooded the town. Once a sleeping town with colourful festivals and dances it lost its peaceful atmosphere and its gaiety. Every home spoke of the dark days that lay ahead. In a land where chivalry and heroic deeds were the themes of the ballads and the folk tales, every youth waited to bag the pajeng firals, silk dhotis and rewards for their chivalrous deeds. But the heroic people lost their battles in every front! Brig. General H.Collet marched from Kohima with a strong force, Brig. General T. Graham led another force from Tammu and Lt. Col. Rennick from Silchar. Many a renowned soldier of many battle-fields were sent to different battle-fields but almost all returned save a few. Major Jambhuban was given a good send-off at the gate of the palace to resist the enemy in the northern front but he returned without encountering the enemy, and the Senapati was sent to stem the tide of war in the tracks of

Silchar but he also returned without any success. Yaiskul Lakpa and Sangoisana fell fighting in the battle-field. One fine morning, Imphal was electrified with the news that Paona Brajabashi fell fighting at the battle of Khongjom. His last words were, "Cannon, cannon, O great king of Manipur, give us cannon to save our motherland, but die I must on the battle-field and never shall I leave the post!"

"Sanaton, I sent my physician to your sanggai, is there any sign of improvement?" old Thangal said to the Yubarah as he barged into the Top Garod and threw himself on cane chair. The latter sat sedate on the chair reclining on a long chair and he looked quite perturbed in his eyes.

"Ipu, a bit relieved!" said the Yubarah with a vacant look but "Ipu, the motherland is going through the travails of a great sorrow!"

"Ningthem, just the pangs of perturbation a country passing through the agonies of birth or death, of course I pray to Lord Govinda, I beseech Thee the motherland to be born again, thousands pray!" the old man said with his chin resting on his cupped hands.

The morning sunshine passed through the window the Yubarah looked at the wounded and dead lallups carried on the cobbled road. He looked at the old man and became reticent for a long time and said "Ipu now I have decided to go to the battle at Khongjom and die there fighting like a kshetriya"

"Ningthem you see I am too old and you being the Yubarah should not leave the palace at this hour!" the old man said as he looked in his eyes with moistened eyes. "a time will soon come for us both." But, the Maharajah has decided to send Moirang Atonjao and some escorts to China to seek our shelter and come to Manipur to regain our lost country when the time comes!"

Both sat silent for a long time, without any words and nothing was heard save the tapping of shoes on road.

"Ningthem, what is the latest news from the battle-field of Khongjom?" Giridhari said as he stomped into the Top Garod.

"Cannon did not reach the battle-field in time, it was too late and Brajabashi was killed on the battle-field," the Yubarah said as he mopped his sweat from his forehead. "The situation is no good! please be seated"

In the darkness of night, Moirang Atonjao left the palace with two bagful of silver coins and one bundle of gold-coloured zhari chaddars crossing the Nongpok-thong on the Imphal river. One Burmese followed him on white stockinged pony. The Yubarajah and General Thangal bid good-bye to him with moistened eyes. The prince said, "Ipu, now came the end; the Maharajah said, my motherland lost its freedom during my reign!" and he stood watching resting his body on the saddle. He trotted on his chestnut horse with the old general to the Top Garod and threw themselves on the chairs.

Prince Jillangamba walked into the Top Garod with a pale face; streaks of sweat raced down his forehead in the sweltering spring heat, and he stood silent near the Yubarajah who said, "Jilla, have you done the job?"

"Yes, Yambung!"

"Sit on the chair."

Jilla drew a long breath and sank on the chair. Old Thangal looked at the young man blinking his eyes.

Late in the night, Jilla busied himself in the arsenal of the palace; lallups dragged the cast-iron cannon into the dank room and they put all the powder kegs in the room. A huge explosion shook the palace like an inferno and destroyed the armoury within seconds; the Yubarajah looked at the scene of explosion from the Top Garod and he stood like a statue gazing on the smouldering fire. Two hundred horses waited near the Nongpok-thong, the bridge over the Imphal river and as the night fall came, the Maharajah and Yubarajah and all princes rode out of the palace under the most mysterious circumstances. Ayapurel, the Major, and Col. Shamu, the Luyang Ningthou and almost all the retinues followed behind. All the movements were quite strange to the kuts and lallups. Maipakpi bid farewell to the Yubarajah with tears racing down her face; she could not hold herself and the grounds swayed under her eyes and she sat on a big stump of a tree. How time had passed, she thought. All the glory and even the name itself had almost been like the phantom and everything melt before her. She remembered the Royal priest, Thakur Das pacing with a resounding brass bell by the statue of Lord Govinda on the palaquin proceeding to Khongman Mapal, because no Engrez soldiers could touch such a statue! Was it a chimera! Lord Govinda left the place amidst the

wailings of the ladies in the zenana. Where was her future, she thought and looked at the full moon of the Shajibu; the palace looked like a dream and its rooms howled with the gusts of April! But the beauty of nature was still there; the tender leaves of trees and the spring birds and the mellow evening breeze! The moon also did not fail to cast its opulent light on the palace-scape. To her, it seemed the tops of tall trees watched the whole scene silently. "Don't you see all trees and all spirits what had befell on the land and its ruler!" she cried aloud and closed her eyes. 'But should I not defend my motherland when an iota of strength lies in my body', she cried aloud. For she could defend the palace now in her hand.

The Yubarajah turned his face back and saw the towering fire over the tall trees and said, "Sir Chandrakirti's curse!"

"Ningthem," cried the old General, "don't you hear me?"

The Yubarajah stood watching the huge smoke raising in the moonlight and he was so much absorbed in the sight that he did not hear the old man calling to him. The old man drove his horse near him and touched his shoulders and said, "Ningthem, let us go!" Now the Angom Ningthou is the caretaker! Will he keep everything in tact?

"Ipu, let us see, the sarkar won't be slow to enter into the palace, today is Sunday; of course, the royal guards will fight to the last!"

"Ningthem, where is that dame, Maipakpi, why don't you bring her here?" the old man said with a wry smile on his face in the moonlight.

"Poor Maipakpi, she won't leave the palace till the end, a crazy dame!" the Yubarajah said as he turned his face and followed the long train of kuts and lallups.

Chaobhal and Yengkhoiba rode around the palace with the remnants of the royal force and with contorted faces, they sat on the horses with long spears and rifles on the sides of the horses. The former said, "My master left me and my motherland and I am sure, he will come again with a strong force to drive the sarkar! He loves his motherland so much."

Yengkhoiba sat on his horse and said nothing and they rode towards the western gate and gazed on the long dusty road towards the China brick hump bridge under the waning moonlight.

On the western wall of the fort-palace strolled the posse of the royal sepoys, the remnant of the New army with the muskets on their hands and some lallups guarded the precincts of the throne chamber and they kept the Ramandi scripts printed, sacred chaddars on their knacksacks and some filled their muskets with yellow powder and rusty ram-rods in their hands. Almost all the sepoys and lallups had returned to their bunkers after baths and brunches and dug in the long trenches. "What would happen if the sarkar's sepoys enter into our palace!" one young lallup said with his eyes in wonder. "Hell, you young chap, get your musket and ram-rod ready and fire but you keep your Ramandi printed chaddar tied on your head tight and then you die, so you follow the Sanatona dharma, the creed of all kshetrias, but you must shout, Jai Jai Durga Mataki Jai," the older lallup. The young lallup looked at him with his eyes peering his. Trooper Knowles crossed the Nambul river and slid through the western gate unnoticed and his other troops waded through the Imphal river and scaled the eastern wall and stalked on the walls near the throne chamber.

"Oh, sons of soil, prepare yourself for death!" the older lallup cried like one chanting his daily prayer and he took out the Ramandi chaddar from his knacksack and tied it on his head and shouted "Jai, Jai Durga Mataki Jai," and he raised his musket but the shot came out with a dull thud. The ram-rod flew out of the barrel with the metallic sound and it ricocheted and fell before him. My God, he said, I had forgotten to take out the ram-rod, hell. He rushed to pick up the ram-rod and put the yellow powder and put the iron rod again. By the time, one white soldier took the musket from the old lallup, who saluted to the soldier in total amagement.

In the noon sky, he saw the Union Jack fluttering in the air. Trooper Knowles came towards the lallup and led them into an open space near the Top Garod and within a few hours, the sarkar's sepoys fell in line before the palace.

Chaobhal and Yengkhoiba had a narrow escape from the sarkar's sepoys and had they been at the western gate they might have been hauled and they basked sunshine before the Top Garod like the few lallups and kuts who defended the palace. "We are lucky, Chaobhal," Yengkhoiba said as they rode towards the marshes of the Lamphel on the road hidden under the

thickets of bamboos. Believe me, we could raise a garrison and fight back the English sepoys but Yengkhoiba said as they rode on

Chaobhal looked back at him with his mouth agape. 'Master, what is that?'

But the Yubarahah will surely send a message from Chassad, he is a prince who won't stop there, he said. He told me he would write to the Empress of China, Tzu Hsi for help to drive out the British from Manipur. Moirang Atonjao will do everything in advance.'

Chaobhal looked back as he drew the bridle and stopped in the middle of the road and said, 'But Ojha, I hardly believe Atonjao's words.'

Why, Chaoba? said the other as he drew the bridle.

He was seen in some village on the way and his companion fell out with him and he went to join his family. Chaobhal said with tears in his eyes, 'The old Maharani is seeking his hand for Ombisana! Prince Lukhoisana will surely claim the throne when the sarkar rule the land, as you know the old Maharani has her adherents like Pitamber, Sangindhaja and a host of others.'

But it is quite surprising that he should marry a princess and betray the Yubarahah for two bagfuls of silver coins and some gold zhari sheets. Yengkhoiba said and he saw a tall man with big turban hiding his face went near the two and said, 'Hail Ojha, have a visit to my poor hut! But you two must come when there is complete darkness.'

The turban man rode off on his horse through the thickets of bamboos and jumped over the ditches and disappeared behind a curve in a narrow lane. Yengkhoiba and Chaobhal looked each other in wonder for a few moment without a word. The latter said, 'Ojha, do you know the man?' He nodded silently and they rode towards the marshy land and vanished.

In the darkness of the night they emerged from the marshes and trotted silently towards the hut of the old man and to their surprise they found that not a single soul lived in the thatched houses. It was like a dream, darkness enveloped the homesteads of Imphal dwellers, not a single sound could be heard but the usual howlings of jackals near the marshes.

"Are you not Ojha Yengkhoiba?" a voice cried in the darkness.

"Of course,!" came the reply

The hooded man lit the lantern and showed his face and said, "We saw each other!" The three laughed and followed the hooded man to his hut.

The lallups knelt before Yengkhoiba silently. Chaobhal laughed a hearty laughter and he found all the royal soldiers there.

"How many horsemen could we raise, Ojha," Chaobhal said through his lips.

"About three hundred in no time!" Yengkhoiba said.

"Then, Ojha, we could strike back!" Chaobhal said nodding his head confidently.

After one week or so, the news of Atonjao's treason was the gossip of the land; they knew well in advance that the wily Chief of Chassad would not allow the princes to cross the border. One evening, Yengkhoiba said to Balhav, the hooded man, "The Maharajah had surrendered to the sarkar, so too the Senapati save the Yubarajah and it is because Moirang Atonjao had betrayed and he is conspiring with Maharani Premamayee to instal Prince Lukhoisana on the vacant throne of Manipur."

All looked at Yengkhoiba silently who continued, "Princess Sanatombi is visiting the Chief Political Officer's office, almost daily, may be for the lost herds of horses or cattle, or paddyfields commanded to the sarkar but there is also a rumour that she is going to divorce her husband, Manikchand and marry the new Chief."

After Moirang Atonjao's treason, the Maharajah and his escort of two hundred sepoys could not cross the border and go to China; long journey on the hilly tracks and on the boats, Prince Tekendrajit lost the glowing health and he said, "Better die a warrior's death, Ipu." They all agreed to return to the valley and fight against the Engrez and die like warriors on the battle-field!" They hastened towards the valley in the darkness of night. The squals hit the tops of hills and thick jungles. One night, General Thangal found Prince Tekendrajit in a highly delirious state, and he felt his pulse but it sounded the rub-dubs of the mridangas! Was it the poisonous mosquito or the unseen viper lurking in the night? All stood watching the helpless prince in a delirious

state. Hopes dashed on the ground; they had lost the battle for freedom and they would even lose the battle to sacrifice their lives! All petrified at the sight. The Yubarajah lying on the bed of straws who could not raise even a single arm to take a glass of water! The long dugout boats went on down the turbulent streams and rivers under the bamboo roofs. In the stillness of night, they lifted the Yubarajah from the dug-out boat and nursed him in a hut in the jungle till he came round.

One fine evening, the Yubarajah surprised Thokchom Dewan in his residence and to his surprise, he learnt that Maharajah Kullachandra surrendered to the sarkar and so too old General Thangal and all his brothers. He lay on the bed with his eyes open. All spoke in whispers because the sarkar had declared big sums of silver coins for his head. The Dewan paced to and from in the next room and he tuned his ears to the footsteps of the sarkar's sepoy who, with the sense of hunting hound searched all the nooks and corners of the town.

At an outlying village, one night with drizzling rains, one turbaned rider, mouth bound with a black cloth knocked on the door of Maipakpi in her shelter and said in whispers, "Maipakpi, one man wishes to see you this night at a place which no man on this earth could reveal its location and you need not ask his name also, a man who cherishes you! A prince!"

Maipakpi looked at the face of the man and nodded her head and she picked up a silk sheet from her bundle of clothes and walked to the horse waiting her.

The lone rider galloped by her side as she rode a horse and she heaved a sigh thinking that something might have befallen on the Yubarajah; she knew that he was no other than her prince. They rode along the western bank of the Imphal river. The rain poured with thunders. At last they emerged from the bank of the Imphal river and rode on the high river bank and they entered into a walled gate

"Come inside, Maipakpi," the prince called out to her who walked towards him with the rustling of her phanek and she stood gazing on the prince speechless.

"Don't you recognise me, I am the Yubarajah!" said the prince. "Sit down. Today, I tell something to you."

All looked around in wonder speechless under the oil lamp.

The prince lay on his back with his lips tight, and he rose from the bed, and he looked at her. "Sit down, I tell you, I now intend to surrender myself to the British general at the palace, you see, my time is over now," the prince said.

Maipakpi stood mute and silent with her toes driving on the ground floor.

"Do you listen, Maipakpi?" the voice continued.

"Now I shall deliver my green scabbard sword to the British general," the Yubarah said with tears running on his face.

She only nodded her head but words stuck in her throat while the oil light flickered in the tiny room.

GLOSSARY

- achkan,** a kind of tight fitting coat.
- anhics,** prayer
- arambai,** a weapon like the tip of an arrow used by the Manipuris for throwing backward at the time of retreat.
- Angom Ningthou,** a title for the office of the palace.
- asti,** mortal remains of a cremated body for consignment in the Holy water of the Ganges
- aarati,** lighted oiled cotton wrapped on a piece of bamboo at the time of prayer;
- Ayapurel,** title given to the man for Burmese affairs;
- Bokul pareng,** gold necklaces shaped like the bokul flower.
- Bhok aarati,** the offering of meals to the Lord Govinda.
- Balaram,** name of the General Sawaijamba.
- Cheirap.** the Manipuri court;
- Charot,** a kind of wild grass; roots are used by shampooing lady's hairs;
- Chinghi,** a liquid prepared from the indigenous herbs for shampooing hairs.
- Charot-shambrei,** indigenous herbs for hair shampoo;
- Chinglen lantaba,** the title given to Maharajah Surchandra;
- Chief kammeson amuk hallak loro,** the Chief Commissioner will not come again;
- Nine chilly firebrand,** the size and danger of a man-eating tiger is rated by the number of chillies, a nine chilly firebrand is capable of killing man;
- dhobi,** washer-man;
- Dice,** a kind of game with marked dots;
- Gowal aarati** the time of offering lighted oil cotton at the time of return of the cows in the evening;
- Garod,** the court.
- Hangam mapal,** the flower of the mustard plants;
- Hija mayek,** the striped skirt of the Manipuri ladies;
- Hatlo,** kill, murder;

- Itonshi, uncle,
 Ingellei, a flower in the hills.
 Ipu, literally it means grand-dad, a title addressed to ministers and other highly placed dignitaries;
 Kari pammi, what do you want?
 Jinjur, a kind of gold necklace;
 Kairen kaijo, the coffin for the royal dignitaries;
 Kum, a black dye;
 Koireng, the Manipur name of Prince Tekendrajit;
 Kundos, a white flower
 Kwagok, a silver casket;
 Kang, a play used in Manipur with a piece of ivory or wood on the smooth surface of a hall;
 Kiyang likphang, a king of gold necklace;
 Khoi mahum, a gold ring taken after the nest of bees;
 Khudeishen kaoshen, silver/gold caskets for the kings, Maharanis and other dignitaries;
 Leipak lei, a flowering plant;
 Lang-thouba, the sound produced by beating the sides of the dug-out boats by the oars for catching fishes;
 Lour chatpi phingang shetpi tadagi matu iteima, red clothed the lady who walks on the boundary of paddy-field, the mistress of elder brother;
 Loirung, a kind of lady's striped phanek;
 Lallup chingba, the leader of the lallups,
 Lallups, man who works forty days in a year for the ruler of the land;
 Lamthang khullak, a cotton chaddar with the insignia of the mythical God, Pakhangba;
 Mango, a tree bearing fruit
 Majaibungo, the son of the Maharajah;
 Mora, a short bamboo seat;
 Marei, a kind of gold necklace;
 Miruk, a small basket made of bamboo;
 Ngakra, a kind of fish;

- Ngangoi pareng, a kind of gold necklace;
- Pheidapung, a grass meadow near the palace;
- Pajeng phiral; mini flags awarded by the ruler of the land for gallantry or other distinguished services for the land;
- Poswan, White zhari-lined transferent folded covering of the dance costume;
- Pakhangba, the mythical God-ruler of the ancient Manipur;
- Pranam, obeisance to the elder or preceptor;
- Phige, silk striped phanek;
- Pabungkhwa, means pabung Sanakhwa, title addressed to the Maharajah by his sons;
- Shija, lady married to the sons of the Maharajah;
- Sanggai, the residence of the prince or other dignitaries;
- Sana Khongnang, the big peepul tree;
- Sanakhwa, title addressed to the princes;
- Shabigee khutpa shanouba pai, shanougee khutta shabina pai, chorus during the folk dance meaning,-- hands of the maidens in the hands of the youths and the hands of the youths in the hands of the maidens;
- Singar aarati, the aarati in the morning;
- Shambrei, a kind of leaves of the plant used for shampooing the hairs;
- Sanaton, the young son of the Maharajah;
- Shamjirei, an orchid like the tufts of hairs of ladies;
- Takhellei, a kind of white flower used especially as a bunch of flowers for putting on the ears of the ladies;
- Thabal chongba, a kind of folk dance making a ring of maidens and youths in the spring festival;
- Thambal machugi phanek, the lotus coloured phanek;
- Tumnou, the bay coloured horse;
- Top Garod, a court in the palace;
- Wangkheirapka, a title given to the prince in charge of the Wangkhei division;
- Yaiskul lakpa, the title given to the prince in charge of the Yaiskul division;
- Yambung Elder brother among ~~princes~~.

